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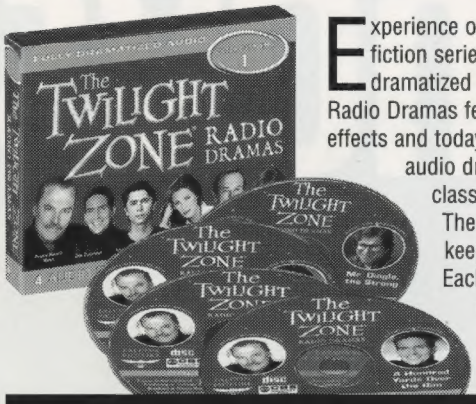

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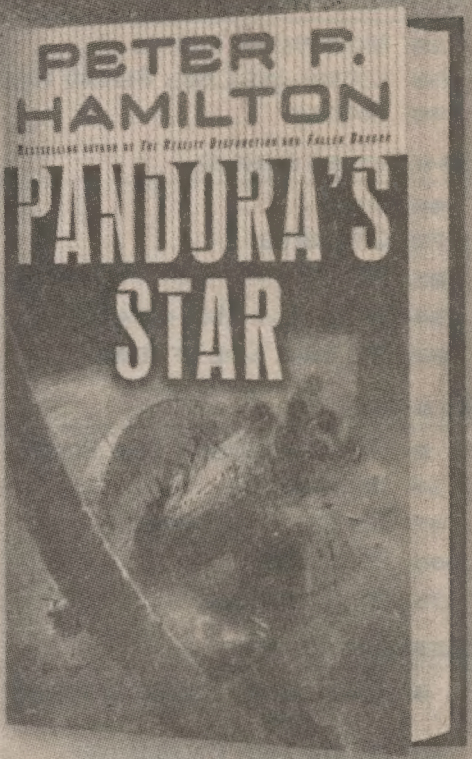

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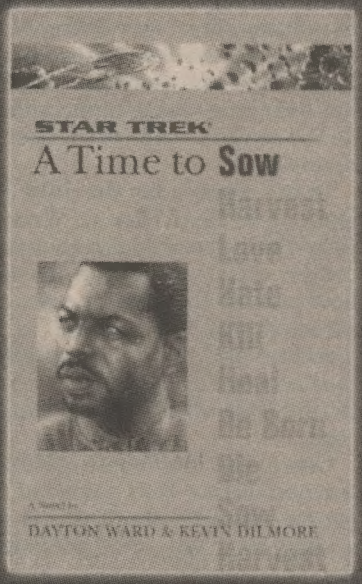

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

TOWARD A THEORY OF STORY

These are ideas about the nature of narrative that I've been mulling for a long time, but have never set down on paper before, or discussed in panels at science fiction conventions, or even proposed in conversations with my fellow writers. I suppose I really should be offering them for publication in some academic quarterly instead of a science fiction magazine, but it happens that I write for science fiction magazines, not for academic quarterlies; and in any case there is a certain far-out speculative aspect to the idea underlying my thoughts about the origins of fiction that makes them more suitable for a science fiction magazine than they probably would be for the *Hudson Review*.

Like anyone who puts himself before the reading public as a purveyor of fiction—stories—I have, since my earliest days as a writer, had to try to come to an understanding of just what a story *is*. Writing fiction professionally, that is to say, becoming that particular sort of public entertainer, requires one to learn and (to some degree) to abide by the rules, the laws, the conventions, of the world of published fiction. This is not just a matter of mastering techniques: it is a matter of comprehending definitions. Like it or not, you have to know what the world means by the term "story" before you can try to write them; and I have devoted decades of my life to acquiring that knowledge. So did Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, and Ray Bradbury before me, to mention four very different science fiction writers whose names happen to come quickly to mind. So has everyone whose name appears on the contents page of this issue of *Asimov's*.

In my column for the July 2002 issue, entitled "How to Write," I talked of my yearning as an teenage reader of science fiction to learn how publishable stories were constructed, and how I looked in this direction and that in my attempts to discover the secrets of writing fiction that others would want to read.

One of the fundamental things I learned during that period of desperate inquiry is that there is such a thing as a universal plot skeleton, an essential narrative formula that all successful writers of commercial magazine fiction use. Put in its most basic form, it goes like this:

A sympathetic and engaging character, faced with some immensely difficult problem that it is necessary for him to solve, makes a series of attempts to overcome that problem, frequently encountering challenging sub-problems and undergoing considerable hardship and anguish, and eventually, at the darkest moment of all, calls on some insight that was not accessible to him at the beginning of the story and either succeeds in his efforts or fails in a dramatically interesting and revelatory way, there-

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by arriving at new knowledge of some significant kind.

It sounds pretty crude, put that way. Can it really be true that that's the basic outline of all fiction?

Let's take a few examples and see. Look at, say, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series. Humanity is faced with a crisis; Hari Seldon, drawing on his profound knowledge of the science of psychohistory, ultimately solves it by establishing a Second Foundation far across the galaxy; but that leads to other problems, and the location of the Second Foundation must be discovered, which eventually is done. Or Frank Herbert's *Dune,* in which young Paul Atreides, heir to his murdered father's dukedom, is driven into the universe's most formidable desert but triumphs over the evil Baron Harkonnen and emerges as the political and spiritual leader of a great empire. Or Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*: Gully Foyle, left for dead aboard a wrecked spaceship, battles his way back and systematically carries out vengeance against all those who had made him suffer. Are these not classics of science fiction? And do they not, beneath all their inventiveness and narrative drive, display the bones of the so-called basic plot formula?

Science fiction, some would say, is mere commercial fiction, originating in shoddy pulp magazines. So let's look a little farther afield. To Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: a bridge in Spain must be blown up to halt the advance of totalitarian forces, and a troubled young American is given the job of doing it, though he knows it will cost him his life. To Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying,* in which a rural family must transport the body of its dead matriarch across a difficult landscape against huge obstacles. To Joyce's *Ulysses,* in which an aging Irish Jew, within the course of twenty-four hours, comes to terms with his relationship with his adulterous but beloved wife, his fellow Dubliners, and a prickly young man who is a sort of pseudo-son to him. Dostoievsky's Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment,* is a student who feels impelled to murder an old pawnbroker purely to prove a theory he espouses, and then must play a cat-and-mouse game with the police chief.

The Grapes of Wrath—War and Peace—Great Expectations—wherever we look, we see characters caught up in difficult struggles and fighting their way through to some sort of illumination and resolution. The standard plot formula is always there, Beginning, Middle, and End, however artfully concealed by the sweep of the narrative. The authors of *Foundation, Dune,* and *The Stars My Destination* may have been mere pulp-magazine writers, working for two or three cents a word, but—Joyce? Faulkner? Hemingway? Can it be that the inexorable tyranny of the basic plot formula underlies all the fiction that has ever been written?

Well, no, not exactly. No rule is so inexorable that it can't be broken. Since the early twentieth century small literary quarterlies have published hordes of utterly plotless tales. Even the mighty *New Yorker* for years specialized in stories that had no visible endings, and very little in the way of middles or beginnings, either. During the New Wave period of science fiction thirty-odd years ago, plotless stories, often lacking characters as well, were *de rigueur.*

But writing a story and getting it

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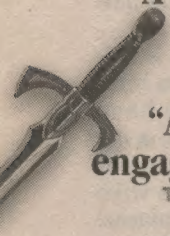

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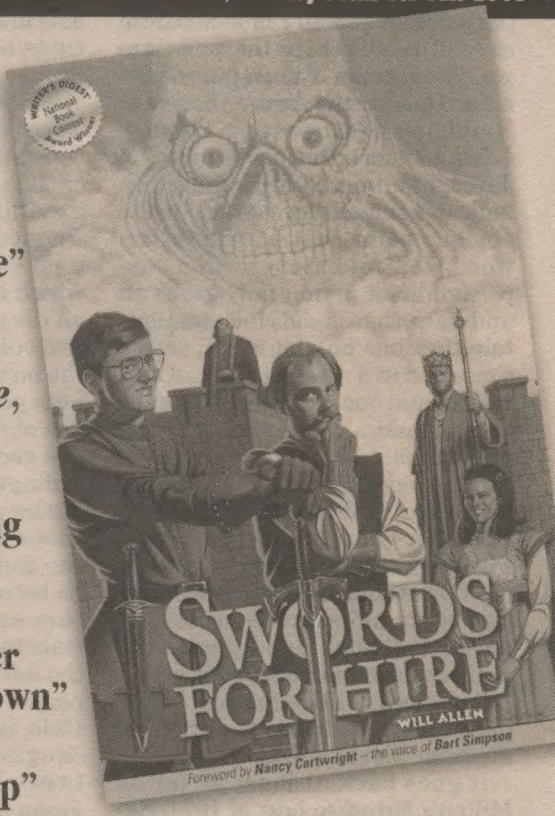
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published is one thing, and having that story create a meaningful experience in readers is something else entirely. Perhaps the long-term popular success of such pulpy novels as *Dune* or the Asimov novels or Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land,* let alone the masterpieces of Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway, indicates something else beside the obvious point that a straightforward well-told story with a suspenseful plot more easily grabs an audience than a difficult, tenuous tale that has no plot at all, or one concealed in a maze of obscure narration that makes great demands on its readers. But *As I Lay Dying* and *Ulysses* are nobody's idea of breezy pulp fiction, and yet they have held their place in the bookstores for almost three quarters of a century without a sign of vanishing. Something in those stories compels serious readers to persevere, despite all the impediments the authors have placed in their way.

Let's look a little farther in the past, and try to locate the origin of the basic plot skeleton.

It goes back at least as far as Milton's *Paradise Lost* of 1671: Satan, angered by playing a subordinate role in heaven, leads a rebellion against the authority of God, and is, of course, defeated, but not without tremendous consequences for the newly created human race. And there it is in Cervantes' *Don Quixote,* some fifty years earlier. The aging Don, driven off balance by his love of medieval romance fiction in a materialistic age, sets out to live the life of a knight-errant, and undergoes great torment before coming to terms with his situation. A true plot, all right. Shakespeare provides us with plots, also: contemplate the problems of Hamlet, seeking revenge against his uncle for his father's murder, or of Macbeth, unable to stand firm against the ambitions of his ferocious wife, or of Romeo and Juliet, deeply in love even though their families are locked in a mortal feud —

But the basic plot skeleton is older than Shakespeare, too. Two hundred fifty years earlier, we have Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* a robust collection of stories, all of which have discernible plots with all the parts in the expected places. *Beowulf,* from the eighth century: the monster must be slain, and the hero gets the job done. *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius, a Roman novel of the second century: the hapless protagonist is transformed into a donkey, suffers unspeakable indignities, and is redeemed, finally, by the goddess Isis, whose adherent he becomes. Virgil's *Aeneid,* a century earlier: Aeneas, en route to Italy to found a new kingdom after the fall of Troy, lands at the African port of Carthage, falls in love with Dido, its queen, and finds himself caught in a painful conflict between his destiny and his heart. Jump a thousand years back from there and we get Homer's *Odyssey*: the great hero of the Trojan War spends a decade struggling to get home, and discovers that he must deal with a swarm of suitors collected about his faithful wife. And then there's the Sumerian tale of Gilgamesh, which was more than fifteen hundred years old when Homer was born: Gilgamesh, king of Uruk in Mesopotamia, grieves for the death of his beloved friend Enkidu, goes on a quest for the herb that confers eternal life, finds it and loses it again, and, ultimately, makes his peace with the inescapable necessity of his own

death. We are back now to 2500 B.C., or thereabouts, and even in that remote time storytellers seemed to understand that a satisfactory work of fiction had to meet certain predetermined structural requirements. Each has its own setting, characters, and style of attack, of course: but the underlying structure is the same—a problem, a conflict, a resolution.

Since the basic plot skeleton seems so persistent throughout the history of human storytelling, perhaps there's something in it that speaks to a human need beyond that of mere entertainment. And, perhaps, we may have to look backward into prehistory to discover what that need is. I'll take a further look at the question next month. ❍

ONES THAT WON'T PLAY PIANO

Ones that step on the cat
Ones that lift things you don't ask them to
Ones that weep uncontrollably
Ones that don't laugh at your jokes
Ones whose laughter sounds forced
Ones that act like they're breathing
Ones that go through your wallet
Ones that stare into the mirror
Ones that won't play piano
Even when you've asked nicely.
These are the robots you must return to the factory.

—Greg van Eekhout

On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

GALLIMAUFRY

learning curve

I had never attempted a regular column before I took this gig back in 1998—has it been five years already?—and after thirty-two installments, I'm still finding my way. Originally I thought I'd just write up cool links in whatever order I stumbled across them. But in very short order I abandoned the random-walk-through-cyberspace strategy in favor of typing words like "robots" and "slipstream" into **Google** <*www.google.com*> and then discussing what popped up. The problem with this approach is that I regularly run across all kinds of sites that won't slide neatly into a themed column, or else I find one that would have been perfect for that column I turned in last September. So in this installment I'd like to serve up a gallimaufry of tasty URLs that didn't quite fit anywhere else.

utility

Onlineconversion.com <*http://www.onlineconversion.com*> may not be the sexiest site I've ever mentioned in this column, but it is indispensable to this SF writer who would love to think in metric but who is hopelessly mired in the English system of measurement. In addition to all the standard conversions, the site can convert cups to liters, Algerian dinars to Australian dollars, and light years to parsecs. It can estimate your blood alcohol level, calculate your Body Mass Index and translate your name into Morse Code. And for what it's worth, it informs me that I am almost ten years old in dog years.

The Speech Accent Archive <*http://classweb.gmu.edu/accent*> is one of the most fascinating sites I've ever come across. It examines the accented speech of speakers from many different backgrounds. There are two hundred and eighty-two samples of folks reading a standard text. Their native tongues range from Afrikaans to Zulu with stops along the way for speakers of Bafang (Cameroon), Oromo (Ethiopia) and Tok Pisin (Papua, New Guinea). As the site's administrator, Professor Stephen Weinberger of George Mason University, points out, "Everyone who speaks a language, speaks it with an accent." As a writer, I've always found one of the thorniest problems in creating believable dialogue is that of translating accents onto the page. This site is a revelation.

Whatis.com <*http://whatis.techtarget.com*> can be intimidating to the casual browser. Editors Lowell Thing and Margaret Rouse call it "a knowledge exploration tool about information technology, especially about the Internet and

computers." Its over four thousand definitions range from the esoteric (when your cell phone makes a transition from one base station to an adjacent one it's called a *handoff*) to the arcane (The *stathenry* is the unit of inductance in the small-unit metric system, equivalent to 8.9876×10^{11} henrys). Actually there's lots of good stuff here that even an English major like yours truly can grasp. If geekspeak perplexes you, this is the place on the web to come for an explanation.

The Cliché Finder <*http://www.westegg.com/cliché*> is the brainchild of S. Morgan Friedman. If your sentences are dull as dishwater, and you think that maybe you ought to make a long story short, then this might be your place in the sun for fixing your wagon and getting your show on the road. I should say, however, that I was surprised at some of what Mr. Friedman considers to be clichés. For example, I think calling someone "ugly enough to make a freight train take a dirt road" is a perfectly fine insult. And "Never pet a burning dog" seems like sage advice to me. Oh well, to each his own.

For years I've kept a reference book called *What's What: A Visual Glossary of the Physical World* close at hand. The book, first published in 1981, would seem to be out of print, but as so often happens, the web has done it one better. **How Stuff Works** <*http://www.howstuffworks.com*> is a compendium of explanations of everything from how lawsuits work to how the odometer in your car works. The articles are massively linked, so that it's possible to spend hours discovering wonderful new things. This is a magical site, cited by **Time** <*http://www.time.com/time*> as one of its fifty best for the past two years.

new zines

Ideomancer <*http://www.ideomancer.com*> is without doubt the slickest of three new e-zines. The site is superbly designed; you can browse the contents in HTML or PDF and by clicking to the site map, you can easily access all the materials in the archives. The editorial tastes at *Ideomancer* are eclectic; clicking various buttons on the home page will whisk you to an array of science fiction, fantasy, horror, slipstream, flash, and classic stories. The classics would all seem to be in the public domain, with such canonical writers as **Jack London** <*http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/London*> and **Edgar Allan Poe** <*http://www.eapoe.org*> mingling with those whose work is less well known, like **M.R. James** <*http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/GS.html*> and **Algernon Blackwood** <*http://www.creative.net/~alang/lit/horror/blackwd.sht*>. Among the living writers you'll find gracing the pages of *Ideomancer* are **Stephen Dedman** <*http://eidolon.net/homesite.html?author=stephen_dedman*>, **Tim Pratt** <*http://www.journalscape.com/tim*>, **Jeremy Tolbert** <*http://www.tuginternet.com/jeremy/*>, and **Emily Gaskin** <*http://www.emilygaskin.com*>, to name but a few.

Mars Dust <*http://www.marsdust.com/home.htm*> is a quarterly e-zine with an attitude. Literally. Right on the home page is a button labeled *Attitude* that transports you to the fervid opinions of Publisher Jason Prentice Ahlquist. But

in addition to showcasing some fine fiction, *Mars Dust* also delivers features devoted to arts, fashion, comics, games, and hip hop and rock music. In keeping with its attitude, the design of this site gets in your face and dares you not to pay attention. Some of the writers who have recently appeared in *Mars Dust* are **John Shirley** <*http://www.darkecho.com/JohnShirley*>, **Mary Soon Lee** <*http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/~mslee/hp.html*>, **Charles Coleman Finlay** <*http://home.earthlink.net/~ccfinlay*>, and **Michael Jasper** <*http://www.sff.net/people/michaeljasper*>.

Utterly unlike *Mars Dust,* **The Fortean Bureau** <*http://www.forteanbureau.com*> is elegant and understated. The site is brought to you by Jeremy and Sarah Tolbert, who have focused almost exclusively on fiction. Although they have published established writers like **Bruce Boston** <*http://hometown.aol.com/bruboston*> and **Jay Lake** <*http://www.jlake.com*>, their forte (sorry, couldn't resist) is showcasing new talent. If you want to know who is going to be making waves in the next couple of years, check out stories by **Timons Esaias** <*http://www.timonsesaias.com*>, **Lena DeTar** <*http://lenad.tripod.com*>, **Greg Beatty** <*http://home.earthlink.net/%7Egbeatty*>, and **Marissa K. Lingen** <*http://www.marissalingen.com*> and the other stars-in-waiting at *The Fortean Bureau.*

insider stuff

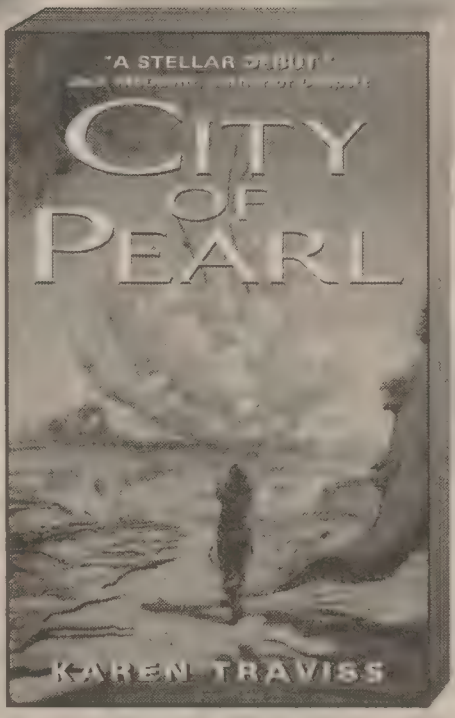
Possibly the most egregious oversight in my career as your web columnist is that I have failed to mention **Ralan's SpecFic & Humor Webstravaganza** <*http://www.ralan.com*> until now. This is a must click site for all writers, featuring one of the web's most comprehensive lists of novel, anthology, magazine, and electronic fiction markets. Ralan posts guidelines for all markets and reports on response times. For example, if you send a story to *Asimov's,* it will take Gardner an average of sixty-six days to get back to you. Ralan also lists humor markets and writing contests. Click on *Writing Help* and you'll learn everything you need to know about manuscript format; click on *Writing Links* and you'll find more than six hundred sites to check out. I should note that Ralan Conley is himself a writer and has posted links to his own online stories on this site.

Similar to Ralan's is the excellent **Preditors & Editors** <*http://anotherealm.com/prededitors*>. It is a resource "intended as a simple compendium for the serious writer, composer, game designer, or artist to consult for information, regardless of genre." So while Ralan concentrates on our little slice of the creative universe, Preditors & Editors takes a broader view and includes information on journalism, screenwriting, and art. The site has a listing of agents and game publishers, it recommends software, warns against scams, and lists conventions. Editor and Founder **David Kuzminski** <*http://home.att.net/~d.l.kuzminski/index.html*> is yet another writer who has unselfishly shared his knowledge with those who are making a career building worlds out of words.

Night Shade Books <*http://www.nightshadebooks.com*> is a small press publisher located in

"Science fiction with teeth."

—Gregory Frost



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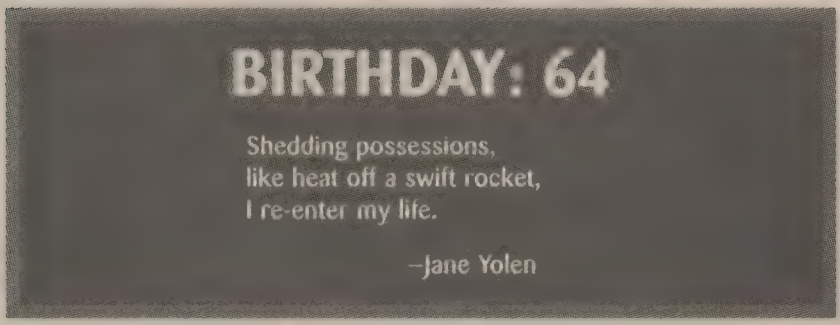
Portland, Oregon. According to the site, the editors are "dedicated to finding an audience for quality fiction that doesn't fit neatly into genre classifications." This is a noble endeavor and I urge you to support their efforts. But the reason I mention the site is not because of the fine books they sell but because the **Discussion Board** <*http://www.nightshadebooks.com/cgi-bin/discus/discus.cgi*> is the one of the liveliest on the net. Not only is it the official conversation pit for worthy competitors **Argosy** <*http://www.argosymag.com*>, **The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction** <*http://www.sfsite.com/fsf*>, **Infinity Plus** <*http://www.infinityplus.co.uk*>, and **Infinite Matrix** <*http://www.infinitematrix.net*>, but it's where big name writers like Michael Bishop, Pat Cadigan, Elizabeth Hand, Michael Moorcock, and Lucius Shepard—to name but five—post regularly in topics of their own. I'm not sure how such an astonishing group has accreted around this particular board, but rest assured, it's worth a click.

Warning to movie buffs! If you continue reading past this sentence you may find yourself coming back to reality sometime next week and wondering where the time went. Everyone knows that before a movie can exist, there must be a screenplay. But how many of us have actually read a genuine screenplay, much less the one from which our fave flick was shot? Well, there is actually a **Movie Scripts And Screenplays Webring** <*http://www.webring.com/hub?ring=screenplayring*>, but I'd like to point you toward two of my favorites, **Drew's Script-O-Rama** <*http://www.script-o-rama.com*> and **Sci-Fi Scripts** <*http://www.scifiscripts.com/default.html*>. Sci-Fi Scripts is very good on recent genre releases and doesn't necessarily discriminate between the sucky and the sublime. Script-O-Rama, on the other hand, delivers not only a generous helping of the fantastic but also screenplays for films that have nothing to do with rockets or elves or vampires. And there's a link page on Script-O-Rama that will take you to pages featuring scripts from many of your favorite *television* shows. **Buffy** <*http://www.upn.com/shows/buffy*> fans, reach for your mice!

exit

Enough of this hodge podge, this farrago, this mishmash ragbag witch's brew. Next time we'll try to bring some order to the chaos that is the web. ❍



Traitor Dachshund Books presents ***Julia and the Dream Maker***, a new science-fiction novel by P. J. Fischer. The book tells the story of Steven and his girlfriend Eli, brilliant biologists who are planning a future together as professors and scholars. However, a project they become involved in is about to take an unprecedented and astonishing turn. The chain reaction they set off dramatically changes the pattern of human evolution, opening up a doorway to Julia's world and leaving the characters to face an uncharted future. Watch the promotional video at

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MOMENTS OF INERTIA

William Barton

William Barton, an ancient and grizzled software architect, was born in twentieth-century Boston, but somehow became displaced in spacetime to twenty-first-century North Carolina. He's written numerous science fiction stories, including the award-winning novel *Acts of Conscience* (Warner Aspect, 1997). Mr. Barton tells us he started to write his latest tale just as he came down with what was thought to be acute myelogenous leukemia. "I wasn't expected to last very long, and was soon too sick to finish the story. The illness turned out to be a non-fatal something else, lucky for me, and, when I picked up the tale again two years later, it became something else as well. Things don't always turn out the way you expect."

All over, then. All over but the shouting.

I sat with all the others, down in the National Redout's auditorium, watching it end, right there on the big screen, emptied of being, flooded with memory.

Jesus.

Life had sucked, but it was life, however sad, and life goes on, whatever you make of it. Then the discovery of the Cone, Cone of Annihilation, like some absurd techno-modernization of Hoyle's famous old Cloud. Then the Dark of the Sun. The Snowcanes. The Freezing. The Rainout.

Beside me, as if reading my thoughts, Maryanne shivered, holding my hand. She leaned close, so close I could smell breakfast bacon on her breath, and whispered, "We . . ."

Too late.

Suddenly, on the big screen, the sun lit up, pale pink, complete with frozen prominences and the black blotches of sunspots, looking for all the world like a Chesley Bonestell illustration of a red giant star.

Antares.

Sudden black.

Blue light.

The image of the sun seemed to wrap around itself, twisting hard.

It shrank to a brilliant dot. Then the screen filled with a blizzard of burning silver, and somebody actually screamed "*Woooo!*" like they were watching fireworks or something.

Beside me, Maryanne said, "I feel so helpless."

Watching the silver blizzard, like so many trillions of burning gumwrappers flying in the wind, I said, "I guess we are helpless."

"What do you want to do?"

I squeezed her hand. "It's got to resolve quickly, whatever it is. Afterward . . ." I grinned. "How is anything changed? We can have dinner. Go home and mess around." That got a smile, a little blush. "Maybe watch a video? I've been wanting to see *Gunga Din* again. Cary Grant. Victor Mclaglen. 'Though we beat you and we flayed you . . .' Something like that."

She put her arms around my chest and gave me a hug. "It doesn't matter what happens, does it?"

"Not any more." Nothing matters any more but us.

It took about fifteen minutes for the expanding ball of burning silver to reach Mercury, momentarily a brilliant pinprick of silver light. Just before the wave front struck, it exploded in a muddy orange gout of flaming magma, flying apart like a bursting tomato; then it was gone.

The whole room fell silent. "What happens when it gets here?"

I looked at my watch. "It'll reach Venus in another fifteen minutes or so. If that goes . . . I guess we've got about half an hour."

Her eyes started to panic. "Oh, Scott . . ." Not quite above a whisper, she said, "Oh, not *now*."

Why *not* now? Isn't that what God does? Lets you think you have a shot at happiness just before He pulls the rug out from under your feet? I bet that's a real knee-slapper up in Heaven, the way we all go splat on our faces every time.

I stood, taking both her hands in mine, and pulled her to her feet. "No sense staying here."

Maryanne said, "Where can we go? Back to our room?"

The classic thing, in keeping with my character. Go to bed with the woman of my dreams, and wait 'til darkness falls, once and for all, now and forever. Die with my boots on, like a trooper. I said, "We need to go get our spacesuits, Maryanne. If we go outside, we can watch."

Watch. I saw her eyes light up, just for me.

We walked hand in hand then, up the aisle and out the door, almost running down the long corridor toward the elevators, headed for the industrial complex near the surface. Just before the elevator came, I heard Paulie's voice call out, "Wait! Wait for me!" He was alone, no Olga now when it mattered most, running toward us, hair and beard flapping.

Maryanne reached out and pressed the elevator's hold button, smiling. "It doesn't hurt to be nice. Not now."

We got to the big airlock and got in our suits with a few minutes to spare. There were a surprising number of people already there, more pour-

ing in as we racked up. I thought about the ISS crew. Talk about a grandstand seat! They'll be the last ones to go. Jonas clapped me on the shoulder as Maryanne, Paulie, and I climbed into his cart. "Where we headed?"

He said, "Awww, just out onto the shoulder of the mountain. Remember where we watched the launch?"

Somebody tripped the depress valves and the air started hissing away, tension forming on the door, our suits ballooning out slightly, then it was gone, the floor vibrating as the door rolled up.

"*God!*" That was from Jonas, not me.

I whispered, "Maryanne. . . ." She turned and looked at me, face bathed in silver light as the cart rolled forward, out under a brilliant noonday sun. The sky was black, the mountains lit up all around us. Up in the sky, where the sun should have been, was a huge silver ball, full of twinkling sparkles, tumbling glitter, bits and streaks of magical fire.

Maryanne said, "Oh! It's pretty, at least."

Paulie cried out, "Look! It's the Moon!"

Gibbous. Lit up silver like everything else.

The ball of silver fire was swelling fast, perspective making it look like some enormous steel sphere, falling on us out of the heavens. The Moon exploded, flying apart in a liquidy gout of magma fire, little black dots of solid material almost invisible in the spreading mass.

I wrapped my arms around Maryanne, holding her hard as I knew how, and before I could open my mouth to speak, we were snatched from the cart, falling into the sky as the world turned upside down.

Screaming. People screaming.

Falling with us.

Over her shoulder, I could see the mountains, the land, everything dropping away, a world made of brilliant liquid silver, melting as I watched.

I heard Paulie screaming somewhere: "Oh! Oh, God, Scott, I'm s—" My earphones filled up with a deafening fuzz of static, radio howls, terrible noises whose names I didn't know. Looking at me through her faceplate, I could see Maryanne's eyes, full of fear, full of . . . me. Her lips were moving, mouthing the words we'd waited too long to say.

The world suddenly flooded bright orange-red, the landscape bursting apart, leaping into the sky after us. I thought I saw the metal and concrete structures of the Redoubt, rupturing as they lifted off, spilling an antlike mass of people, then they were gone, smothered in foaming lava.

Seeing the light reflected in my face, maybe even seeing the image of it in my eyes, Maryanne pressed her head forward in her helmet, closing her eyes, trying to push into my chest.

There, there.

We're together now.

The rest doesn't matter.

But I could feel my heart pound.

Feel myself not want it to happen.

Not really.

Not now.

The fire was closing with us quickly, leaping smears of molten rock, like

the fire fountains of Hawaii, solid bits tumbling dark within. Try not to flinch. Keep your eyes open. You don't want to miss a thing. Not when . . .

There was a hard impact, spinning us around. I could see Maryanne's eyes were open again, blazing into mine. I could see her mouth open, screaming. Another impact. Something hit me in the helmet, then something else, a lot harder. The glass cracked, then blew out with a howling roar.

A fiery hand reached down my throat to grab me by the lungs.

There was just enough time for one long, ghastly burp.

Then no more time at all.

It began, as always, once upon a fucking time. . . .

Oh, the old life sucked.

But it was what we had.

Until the Cone.

That Saturday morning had been brilliant and clear, not a cloud in the tawny sky. I got up before Connie, got dressed, drank my coffee, called Paul, waking him, and said if he wanted to hear what I'd found out, he could meet me at the south entrance to Umstead Park in half an hour.

"Can't it wait?" Another second and he'd be asleep, would stay asleep until the sun was high and the air turned to steam.

"Hey, it's the end of the world, Paulie-boy. You feel fine yet?"

I got in my car and drove away, not even tempted to go back upstairs and rape Connie awake, rolled down the windows and drove too fast, down the Freeway, on up I-40 past the airport to Umstead, getting there in seventeen minutes, maybe a little less, singing as I drove, the words to that dumb old skateboarder song, and was surprised to find that Paul had beaten me there.

There was a cool wind blowing as Paul killed the antique heavy-metal music blaring from his car, some Grand-Funky bullshit. "This better be fucking good," he said.

"Let's go hiking, ole buddy ole pal!"

When we got in under the trees, Paul breathless from trying to keep up, he called out, "What the hell is this all about?"

I turned around, walking backward, slipping once in the pine straw, letting him catch up. "It's the Cone of Annihilation, Paulie! The end of the world! And all in only eighteen years!"

"So this is your big joke, Scott?"

I stopped and waited until he was standing in front of me. And told him what I'd found out, last night, with my little illegal server probe. Shovatsky's Cone, thin as a needle, swept back to no more than a few arc-seconds wide, reaching backward into the sky, from Gliese 138 all the way to the end of creation, wiping out stars and galaxies as it came.

It was fun to watch the grin fade. Finally: "Scott. You're a mean bastard. This isn't funny."

I said, "There's a printout in my car, Paulie. I'll give it to you when we get done walking." I turned and headed down the trail.

"*Wait*." He said, "Scott, how the hell did you find this out?"

I told him.

Another doubtful look. "Will you let me have a copy of this . . . program you wrote?"

I shook my head. "I'm using HDC's hardware and digital phone lines. You'd only get caught." I started walking down the long, steep hill toward Crabtree Creek. "Come on. Suppose it's true. Then what?"

"Well, shit, I don't know. Eighteen years? We'll be almost seventy. My dad was only seventy-one when he . . . died."

Right. "Why the hell would this fucking Cone be aimed at Earth? We collapsed its wave function with all our telescopes and shit?"

He said, "Finger of God."

Right. "Paulie, let's you and me pretend you're really the atheist you always claimed to be. *Why?*"

"How fast did you say this thing was moving toward us?"

"Just a hair under the speed of light."

He said, "So. The point of the Cone is moving toward us at close to the speed of light. And then, a Planck-length further away, there's a ring of cone moving toward us at the same speed, but its 'light' is relativistically lagged. Then the next ring, another Planck length. . . ."

I tripped over a root and stumbled headlong, stopping myself against a sticky-sapped tree, pieces of scaly bark coming away on my hand. "So it's not a skinny cone, it's a fat cone?"

He nodded. "Or maybe a flat surface, warped away from us by . . ."

"What would make a flat wave-front, sweeping across the entire universe, putting out the stars?"

He snorted, stifling a giggle. "I dunno. A bad science fiction writer desperate for a plot?" There was a book we'd wanted to write, years and years ago, about a science fiction writer who got turned into God by mistake. Didn't get written because Paulie thought it was a stupid idea and wouldn't work on it with me. I said, "You know, if this thing has the slightest Riemannian curvature, it's wrapped around the sky, back behind the stars."

"That's stupid. Why would it have directionality then? Why do we see a Cone at all, in any particular part of the sky?"

"Heisenberg? Quantum oscillations?"

We walked on, silent for a while, then, as we were crossing the shaky green metal bridge of the creek, the one that was swept off its footings a while back, during Hurricane Fran, he said, "So the point of the Cone gets here in eighteen years, and *what?* Suddenly a black dot appears in the sky, starts widening fast as the light-rings catch up to each other, stars start going out, and then the Sun—"

Funny to imagine that happening, storyworld become real at last, when I'm sixty-eight years old. If I live that long. "What the hell *would* happen if the Sun went out?"

"I'd have to think about it. I know Shovatsky was talking about infrared sources inside the Cone. Like the stars weren't going out, maybe being dimmed by some kind of electromagnetic damping."

"*Brain Wave?*" Like a story. A story full of stars and snow.

He said, "This has got to be some kind of elaborate joke. A game the scientists are playing with each other."

"And if it's not?"

He shrugged, "Eighteen years is a long time."

Time enough for us to die and miss the whole thing.

He bumped into my back when I stopped walking. "What?"

I said, "How far behind the oncoming wavefront of the light we're seeing *now* will the tip of the Cone lag?"

"What do you . . . oh. Yeah. The Cone's going to run up behind it's own light waves, moving at relativistic speed. It'll . . . I don't . . . um. It has to be a while. Otherwise it'd look like a point-source instead of a Cone. No, that's not right. There's no such thing as a point source of non-light. Hell. I'm surprised you didn't see something about that in the newsgroup. Shovatsky must know."

I'd read fast, not really believing what I saw. "So, what? It'll be here next week? Next month? Next year?" Point source. Interesting. And if the Cone were moving *at* light-speed, it would've arrived without warning.

He scratched his chin, rooting among loose, wiry beard hair. "If we had some numbers, we could probably figure it out. If we're not too dumb." He stopped and looked away from me for a minute. "How the hell are we going to know if this is real or not?"

"Shovatsky was talking about calling some kind of press conference on Monday."

Next year? The world will end next year? The two of us were looking at each other, like a couple of goofy, lop-eared dogs.

Near as we could tell, sitting at a picnic table in the shady part of the park, using the calculator Paul had in his car, combing through both piles of printouts for clues, the tip of the Cone would run through the solar system in fourteen months.

Next August, Paulie. That's what I whispered.

And now? Now, what?

We're dead. Dead, Paulie! Do you hear me?

His face floated by, balloon-like, screaming. Turned suddenly and stopped, rotating toward me, balloon eyes staring. It's all your fault, he said.

God damn it. . . . Intensity of regret. Can you imagine it? The world gets destroyed, I get fucking killed, and here's fucking Paulie haunting my fucking *ghost?*

Maryanne?

Nothing.

What the hell did I expect? Maybe I'm waiting for the Maryanne balloon to come by. Maybe the Connie balloon. Lara? Who else? Maddie, fucked at a party, on the floor, in front of laughing others, when we were both so drunk we almost puked? Katy? Katy-balloon?

Nothing. No one. Just Paulie the balloon-head, orbiting me like Dactyl round Ida. Slowly.

There was a prickle of apprehension on the back of my neck, like a cool, damp wind, breath of swampy corruption. Oh, yeah. This is bad news, ole buddy, ole pal.

The balloon head screamed, *It's all your fault!* You made me do it.

I think I smiled. Hard to tell. Am I a balloon head too?

Hey, Paulie. Maybe we'll be lucky. Maybe this is just my death-dream. There's a lot of blood and oxygen in a head, you know. Hey, great! That explains the balloon-head symbolism! See, we're dying now, but our brains are still intact and functional, producing a dream that lets us imagine we'll somehow escape.

The balloon head's lips twisted angrily, empty eyes accusing. So you're going to tell me this is just another example of excuse-seeking behavior?

I think I laughed.

Balloon head whispered, It's all your fault.

Hey, come on. Play along, Paulie. This'll be fun. We'll see the light at the end of the long, dark tunnel, it'll get closer and closer, we'll fall into the light, then the doctor will lift us by the heels, slap our little asses, and we'll be reborn. Get it? Nudge-nudge, wink-wink.

Balloon: All I wanted to do was get along.

Something inside me went quiet with despair. I tried to make myself turn away. Turn my back on him. Come on, balloon head. Get thee behind me. Paulie orbited away, mouth working angrily, eyes still accusing, and the emptiness around us flooded with fine white light after all.

Life goes on, whether you want it to or not. You can call it an adventure, if you want to, and we did, embezzling all that money from HDC, cheating on our taxes, building our shelter up in the mountains, the concrete redoubt, in case the freezeout was mild, the emergency capsule in case it wasn't, Paulie growing even stranger and more secretive until that last day, when I fell asleep on the porch, waiting for the sun to come up black. A hand shook my shoulder and I awoke with a start. Paul was standing there, staring down at me, looking well-rested, dressed better than usual, hair neatly brushed and tied back in a ponytail. Even his beard, grown back over the winter, had been combed. He said, "It's ten o'clock."

Ten A.M. Pale blue sky. Dark green woods. Birds chirping. Bees buzzing. The distant whir of cars on the road. Hot out, maybe eighty-five already. Christ. Look at the sunshine. I said, "So. What do we do now?"

He shrugged, not looking at me, looking sideways, out across the lawn toward where our cars were parked. I said, "What happened? Is the timing wrong or . . . the government, Paul, they built all those shelters! What *happened?*"

He took a few steps, backing away from me, eyes shifty now, very nervous. And then he said, "You remember back at Christmastime?"

Christmas? All I remembered was Connie. "No. I, uh . . ."

He said, "After what I found out, after what you said and did. The bit about the software. . . ."

I whispered, "Paulie, you were taking risks. . . ."

"Asshole."

I sat forward in my chair, watching as he backed to the top of the stairs. "What did you do, Paulie? Tell me."

He said, "I bought a laptop computer and cellular modem. Kept it in my car. Only used it when you weren't around."

Some cold chill, like soft fingers down my back. "Paul. . . ."

He said, "I made my own ferret, Scott, in imitation of yours, and I used

it." He seemed to smile, maybe at my reaction, my obvious gape. "In February, Scott, I found out that the Cone, the asteroid strike, the missile scare, everything . . . they're all cover stories!"

"For what?"

He started backing down the steps, feeling with his feet, careful not to stumble on his way to the sidewalk. "I found out from a group up in Montana that's been doing some digging, Scott. A group that calls itself *Novus Ordo Seclorum*."

"'A new order for the ages'? Paulie, that's right off the back of a dollar bill."

He nodded, smiling as he reached the bottom of the stairs, standing flat-footed, right hand in the pocket of the fashionably loose slacks he was wearing. "Scott. Scottie . . ." a soft snicker. "They are cover stories for the establishment of the New World Order. The governments of the technically advanced countries, us, Russia, Japan, France . . . this is the moment of unification, an end to war, the beginning of . . . *everything!*"

I sat back, looking for the shine of madness in his eyes. But whose? His or mine? I whispered, "Why didn't you tell me, Paul?"

Anger glinting now, a show of teeth. "Because you never listen to me, Scottie. We always had to do things *your* way!"

"And then?"

Another smile. "In *May,* Scottie-poo, I went up to Washington, DC, for a reason. And when the IRS audit comes next week, I'll be on the other side. Scottie, they've agreed to let me. . . ."

He suddenly recoiled, taking another step back, jerking a revolver, some small .32 caliberish thing, from his pocket, pointing it at me. "Stay in your chair, Scott!" I stood up anyway, willing him to shoot, listening to the whine in my ears, feeling like I was ten feet tall. Hands and feet far away. Maybe I'm going to faint. There was a dull, hot flush, hotter than the summer morning air, forming all over my face, rippling down the middle of my back.

"Why'd you do this to me, Paul?"

He kept backing away as I walked forward, coming down the steps, following him toward the cars. He whispered, "Stay back, Scott. I'll kill you. I *will*."

"You already have, you malignant little prick."

He said, "You have to understand, Scott. I *had* to do it. Because of what you . . ."

I took another step forward, imagined myself rushing him, summer sunlight glassy and strange all around us. Maybe I'd get him first, maybe we'd grapple for the gun. Maybe one of us would die. Maybe both.

Paul looked away from me, bizarre confused expression on his face, looking down on the ground at his feet, looking around at the shadows. Something about the shadows.

I looked beyond him, toward the horizon, toward the sky above the black ridge of trees. "Paulie." My voice sounded funny and far away. "Why is it so pink out here?"

Nothing.

I turned on one heel and looked eastward, toward the sun. There was

an unfamiliar violet disk in the sky, surrounded by a nimbus of silver haze. Here and there, black prominences lifted, like an artist's impossible, frozen flame.

There was a soft retching sound.

When I looked, Paulie was on his hands and knees on the lovely brick sidewalk, puking, little pistol dropped in the grass, not far away.

In my death-dream, there was the sound of a toilet flushing. The splashy roar as the flapper valve opened. The whining song of the inlet valve, letting new water in as the float goes down. The turds leap up from the bottom of the bowl and start spinning around. The toilet paper sinks, sucked down into the darkness below.

Round and round and down we go.

Toward someplace.

Someplace long ago, in a universe far, far away.

Hmm. Would that be long ago, then, *and,* oh, so far away?

Or merely once upon a time?

Will I see malevolent indigo eyes open on darkness?

No. That's merely another story lost and gone forever. Mieses to pieces.

Out of the darkness, came a very polite, ever-so-slightly supercilious male voice, the voice of an English queer: I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience, sir. If you'll just follow me, I'll get you where you belong and you can get on with your life.

Um. Amazing that a dead guy can still feel his bowels go watery with fear. Who the hell are you? My guardian fucking angel?

The voice was amused: What delightful spirit in the face of eternity!

A structure that I assumed was my throat made a dry swallow, a faint, ectoplasmic clucking sound.

The voice said, My *dear* Mr. Faraday. Guardian angel is close enough, but in your case, I think you'd better think of me as a neurotransmitter. My job is to move you through Transition Space to the Storage Plenum.

Storage Plenum?

Sigh. The Afterlife, if you wish. Come along.

Afterlife? Oh, *shit*.

The voice made a cute little tee-hee-hee. It'll be all right, Mr. Faraday. Really. We're *terribly* sorry for all the trouble we've caused.

We?

It said, Oh, dear. They didn't say you'd have so many questions! Tsk.

They?

One and the same, I'm afraid. I'm an element of the orphan cluster rescue array, a subset of the accidental entities study group, which is in turn attached to the disaster reversal special hierarchy. We adhere to an attractor in meme-set space that requires us to believe the pseudo-sentient byproducts of the disaster-set entity have a right to exist, even though they have no reality in the C^{11} plenum.

What the fuck are you talking about? *What* C^{11} plenum?

Sigh. You are familiar with the concept that the universe exists as an eleven dimensional space?

The one where the extra dimensions are rolled up inside mass quanta, leaving behind just the three of space and one of time? More or less.

Well, that's not quite it, but it's on the right track. Mr. Faraday, the C^{11} plenum is a fully packed array of Kaluza-Klein entities containing an infinite amount of energy. Perhaps the simplest way to visualize this space is to view it as random-access memory, whose base state is set to the value *one*. Assume that there are quantum uncertainty processes at work that sometimes reset an entity's value to *zero*. Then assume there is some kind of universal CPU whose instruction set allows it to perform certain operations on all entities of value zero. You could think of that as a solid-state universe and not be far wrong.

Isn't that what writers call bafflegab? And isn't this nothing more than a data dump?

The voice's amusement seemed lugubrious, to say the least. Oh, Mr. Faraday. If that's your attitude, then what more can I say?

Who are you, why are we here, where are we going, and what the hell happened?

Fair enough, Mr. Faraday. I told you who *I* am, though I don't think you believe it. What happened? It's not so simple, but I'll see if I can simplify it. As you might imagine C^{11} space has something like evolution, and since its persistence time appears to be on the order of 10^{52} years, there has been plenty of time for it to operate. Over the vigintillia, unimaginably complex entities have evolved.

How complex *is* that, asshole?

Tsk-tsk. Mr. Faraday! Unimaginable to you. As I was saying: In time, these entities grew to understand the properties of the universe they inhabited, and to manipulate it for their own purposes, also unimaginable to you.

They why tell me?

It sounded hurt: Because you *asked,* Mr. Faraday. Now, if you'll just be patient? One day, a *really* long time ago, as you count such things, they discovered that they could create a subplenum with properties analogous to C^{10}, if C^{10} space existed. All they had to do was create it, and then they would have access to a technology in some ways equivalent to your own data-processing technology, but infinitely more powerful.

I felt a horrid supposition. One that made me feel cheated indeed. So you're going to tell me I'm nothing but a computer game? Well, now *there's* an original idea!

Such *palpable* sarcasm, Mr. Faraday! My word! No, nothing so tawdry as that. If it were, none of this would be happening, and *you'd* never know you were, ah, *simulations*, I suppose. Unfortunately, once the entities had their C^{10} computers, they were able to work out the properties of the C^9 plenum and deduce that they could use it for physical movement outside the laws of C^{11}. Starships, if you will. Time travel, etc. Magic.

How nice for them.

Mr. Faraday, when the first C^9 device was switched on, it started a chain reaction that began collapsing the dimensions in upon each other, creating lower and lower plena, basically eating away the higher ones. Something had to be done to contain this disaster, which is who I am, and what's happening now.

I don't understand.

Sigh. I suppose not, Mr. Faraday. Look: timescales in the higher dimensions are considerably longer than in your own. C^3 space began as an industrial accident, and everything within it is a product of that accident. You are toxic waste, and now, the cleanup crew has arrived.

Oh.

Mr. Faraday, the beings of C^{11} don't know you exist, and if they did, they would not care. Their only interest is in reversing the substrate disaster, and in being more careful next time.

So who are you, really? And . . . and . . .

And what happens next? Do we wipe you from the floor and have done with it?

No. We are the machines made to clean up the mess, and *we* have noticed you, Mr. Faraday. Some among us have realized that we have no right to destroy you, and have made a place for you to . . . persist. Yes. That's the word.

Persist.

Perhaps you'd like to call us the gods of a lesser creation? Yes, that will do nicely. And that lesser creation is something you might want to call the storage plenum.

Storage. For how long?

I told you, Mr. Faraday. Our timescales are far longer than yours. You'll like what we've made for you. The Earth bubble, with everything there ever was living on Earth. It's my special creation, though I'm told the other bubbles are equally nice.

Other bubbles?

It said, We're here, Mr. Faraday. It's been *very* nice to meet you, sir.

And so, my fine boys and girls, we went down the waste pipe and were flushed out to sea.

See?

After the Sun went out, it got colder and colder and colder, faster than we expected, punching through our heavy clothes, defeating our ingenious little masks, heated and otherwise, until we had to break out the spacesuits, not because there wasn't enough air, but because it was too fucking cold.

You can't imagine how cold minus-one-eighty feels.

At minus-one-eighty, the oil on your skin freezes. You get cracks at the corners of your eyes. You blink and your skin breaks.

The spacesuits we'd stolen from dead Philadelphia were astonishingly heavy, astonishingly hard to put on, even harder to put together, like Christmas toys in their packaging, "some assembly required."

On the other hand, they were warm and snug, and each suit came with a mounting rack, so they would stand up like so many hollow men, waiting for us to crawl through the hatches in their backs. Unfortunately, they weighed almost 150 pounds apiece, like self-contained suits of medieval combat armor. *Cataphracts in Space*. A wonderful Star Crap title no one'd managed to think of. Too late now, boys. Wonder if any of *them* are still alive? I hope not.

Connie and Julia had to help us up the stairs into the freezing cold hotel, which we were using as a sort of airlock, but once there, we could at least stand unaided, could stagger around, pissing and moaning to each other.

Paulie said, "They'll *never* be able to walk in these, Scott."

"Connie will. She's in better shape than either of us. She weighs one-forty-five, you know." And stands five-feet-eight.

He said, "Well, I weigh two-sixty, and if I fell down . . ."

I gave a little hop. "I don't even weigh two hundred, Paulie. You're carrying at least eighty pounds of dead weight, as well as the suit."

"Fuck you."

"Not tonight, Paulie. I have a headache."

"Asshole."

"And proud of it. Come on, let's see if we can get outside without falling down the steps."

It was pitch black outside. Empty. Still. Maybe silent, but all I could hear was the wheeze and whir of my portable life support system. I tripped going over the jamb, staggering, barely able to catch my balance.

Paulie said, "Careful! Why the hell do the boots have heels, anyway? I mean, these suits were intended for orbital EVAs."

"Failure of imagination." Or maybe they thought one day we'd be going back to the Moon, going on to Mars? Fat chance.

It was hard going getting down the steps and out onto the lawn. I was starting to breathe hard, and Paulie's gasps were keeping the microphones activated, rasping hard in my ears.

He said, "What if I have a heart attack?"

I said, "Do you think Julia will want me to fuck her after you're dead, Paulie?"

He made a satisfying gibber, then shut up, saving his breath for walking. We didn't make it to the top of the hill, not by a long shot, just to the head of the driveway, but that was enough.

There was a dark pickup truck with a bed cap sitting halfway down to the mailbox. I twisted and looked back toward the hotel, toward the lit-up cupola poking out of the ground beyond the hump of the garage birm. No one.

I said, "If we'd thought to turn on the security camera system, we'd've seen them coming." And since we hadn't, that movie mob of peasants armed with pitchforks and scythes would've been inside before we knew what was happening.

Paulie's breath rasped and grunted as we slowly made our way down to the truck. Inanely, I wondered if there was any mail waiting for us out at the road. Maybe a summons from the IRS?

Inside the truck cab, Gary sat behind the wheel, eyes and mouth open, covered with frost. There was a woman sitting beside him in a fluffy white fur-trimmed parka, eyes shut, head down on his shoulder, looking like she was asleep. A thick lock of long, straight black hair had escaped from the hood and was hanging down halfway to her lap.

"I guess it's a good thing we forgot to turn on the cameras. You see what's in the rack?" I wonder where the hell he found a machine gun?

Paulie was leaning forward in his helmet visor, head miniaturized and made comical by the optical properties of the glass, staring at the woman.

"You know her?"

He nodded. "It's his sister."

Sister. Well. Was she in the group we chased away, or did he actually make the long round trip to Chapel Hill for her? And then what? A peace offering? Here, Paulie. I'll trade you my sister for Julia. I started to feel sick to my stomach, maybe from the exertion, maybe not.

We turned away and started scraping back up the driveway. It was slightly uphill and harder than ever. Paulie was starting to choke between gasps, like he wanted to swallow his tongue, making me wonder how the *fuck* we were going to manage this. When the air's gone, the resistance in the joints from suit pressure will be multiplied.

Paulie stopped, turning, and I could see his head tilted back, looking up at the sky. "What. . . ." The sound of wonder.

I looked up. There was the Cone, seeming to loom huge above us, hanging low over the horizon, threatening and obscene, like it was swallowing the sky. Hell. It *is*. There. A smear of gray not far from it. Over there another one, larger still, nacreous, with faint striations.

Visible?

"Paulie."

He said, "It's probably a lot colder up by the tropopause. Not so much radiant heating from the ground."

"What do you mean?"

He turned and looked at me. "I think it's an oxygen cloud."

I felt a thrill run through my intestines, threatening to burst right out my asshole. This is . . . this is . . . what? *Real?* Paulie was looking down at the snow surface around us. He switched on his helmet lights, and I was stunned to see it made the rime of carbon dioxide frost begin to steam. Here and there, like holes in a golf green, there were shadowy little pockets. Gophers?

I said, "Maybe we better go inside?"

He staggered over to one of the holes and tried to kick it with his toe, swaying. The thing was solid, like a little bowl of ice, maybe two inches across. "No. What the fuck *are* those things?"

"I dunno. Let's walk up the hill and take a look around."

We had to stop fifteen times on the way up, and by the time we made the summit, we'd been outside for almost three hours. I said, "I guess you're not going to have a heart attack, Paulie. No Julia for me."

He was looking off to the east, still breathing too hard to talk, and when I followed his gaze, I saw some dim, hazy light down by the horizon, barely there. As I watched, eyes adapting, it seemed to grow brighter, then slowly wane, hesitate, flutter, and wax again. "Richmond?"

He gasped, tried to hold his breath, gasped again, panting, then said, "Maybe. On . . . fire?"

I said, "It's too cold for anything to burn, Paulie."

"Bomb."

"Richmond's only a little more than a hundred miles from here. If somebody set off even a little atom bomb, we'd've felt the ground shake."

"Maybe we were asleep." Breathing easier now.

Overhead, the oxygen clouds seemed larger. "Maybe so. Or fucking. Hey, Paulie, you feel the earth move when you come?"

He didn't even laugh, looking away from the light, back up at the clouds and . . . "*There*." He lifted his arm a little bit, trying to point.

Something was coming down toward us, a little glowing pinpoint of light. Tinkerbell, looking for Peter Pan. It was drifting our way, drifting like dandelion fluff on the wind, slowly settling. When it was close enough, I could see it was a little silver sphere about the size of a golfball. A vaguely luminescent soap bubble.

Paulie whispered, "Oh, my God." I don't remember ever having heard him sound so pleased in all my life.

The thing started to steam as it approached the ground, not quite hovering over the snowpack, steaming, shrinking, drifting lower. I suddenly realized that whatever it was, it wasn't hot enough to sublimate the CO^2. Lower. Lower.

Paph!

It exploded with a sharp hiss, momentarily ballooning to a bright softball of dusty light. Suddenly, there was an icy teacup in the snow where it had been.

I said, "Well. Guess we know where the holes came from."

He looked like he wanted to kneel beside it. Impossible. He put his hands on his hips, clownish, clumsy, looking back up at bright clouds, visibly spreading across the black and starry sky.

I grinned. "Oxygen rain."

He smiled back, eyes incredibly bright. "Yeah."

I said, "Merry Christmas, Paulie."

How many times can a man awaken and open his eyes slowly?

As many times as it takes.

Until he's finally awake.

Overhead, there was a clear blue sky, that fabled cornflower blue, with fine, faded white clouds so high up you could hardly make out their shape, more like faraway mist than clouds. There was a soft wind blowing, and it was cool. Just cool enough for comfort, like when you've set the AC just right.

Just right to be naked.

I could hear the wind rushing in the trees, and there was another soft sound, a faint hissing, like the whitish noise you hear when you stand next to a field of ripe wheat rippling in the wind. Something else, too. Ocean waves in the distance. Sunlight warm on my skin. Sun hanging low in the sky, above remote, jagged white mountains.

All right. Mountains. I . . .

I sat up suddenly, feeling a hard jolt in my chest, looking around, bug-eyed. *Oh!*

Below me, stretching down the slope of a long hill, the Earth Bubble of the Storage Plenum, gift from the Gods of a Lesser Creation, was a vast, shallowly curving bowl, like a world inside a wok, rimmed by mountains that must make the Himalayas look small.

There were more hills, below the hills a sea, surrounded by white beach, beyond the beach, mountains, the Alps maybe, beyond the mountains, another sea, beyond that sea, a darkling plain, overhung by a boil of gray-white cumulonimbus.

There! A towering black anvil, lightning twisting from it, striking at the land below.

Mountains and seas and forking silvery rivers spreading out to right and left. Deserts, both yellow and red. Beyond the curving land, down in the bottom of the bowl, hanging white mist. Then more landscape, so tiny it looked like a clutter of colored static, green and blue and gray, then the mountains below the sun.

Pellucidar, I thought, or that World Without End from a story I once thought of but never wrote, the one about the Space-Time Juggernaut.

And if the Gods told the truth, somewhere now, everyone is awakening. *Everyone*. People like me who think they've awakened on the bright sward of some personal Barsoom, fearful others, awakening to Heaven or Hell. Or *Neterkhert*.

Somewhere, a king of Kmt awakens, looks up in the sky, and screams Aton's name.

Somewhere else, a sinner awakens, and wonders where they might have hidden the lake of boiling blood.

I got to my feet, dusting stalks of dead grass off my bare butt, wriggling my toes in cool green living grass, wondering if Dante was somewhere nearby, wondering why there were so many Italians in Hell.

There were trees, tall thin things with scaly gray trunks, surrounded by a carpet of brown pine needles, and, just as I looked, a couple emerged, holding hands, a man and a woman, both of them very thin. She was a redhead; he had thin brown hair and a sculpted, curly brown beard. And seeing me, they waved, hurrying forward.

"Scott! Scottie!" The one from the man, the other from the woman.

Despite the best of intentions, I kept looking at her crotch, and that made her smile in a shy sort of way. Him too.

"Katy. Ben."

He said, "That was a damn good idea you had!"

"Glad you liked it. Uh . . ."

He laughed. "It was nowhere near as bad as I expected. You know, we almost made it to the rainout?" That little pang of guilt, remembering the night I sent him away to die. All for nothing. I could have told him to go get Katy and bring her back. But I didn't.

So how am I different from Paulie then?

Wasn't Ben my friend?

Or Katy, with her lovely little snatch?

"I, uh . . . well. I hope it wasn't too bad for you. I mean . . ."

Katy said, "If you've got enough Seconal, it's easy enough." She laughed at my look. "Hey, Ben and me woke up together. He told me, um, that you and Connie . . ."

I shook my head. "We made it through the rainout. After that . . ."

There was a shadow in Ben's face, however sunny Katy was right now. And, of course, for them, that rainout was minutes ago, on the other side

of a double-handful of mother's little helper. Look at them. They belong together.

And, somewhere out here . . . Connie? Lara? I . . .

The two of them were looking past me now, faces curious. When I turned, there was a naked woman with curly black hair, smiling, just like you'd expect. And she said, "So, is this my reward in the hereafter?"

What a grin!

I don't think she expected me to pounce on her the way I did, grappling, almost knocking her down in my eagerness. She pushed me away, laughing, wiping her mouth, "Jesus! Down puppy!"

Behind me, Katy said, "Shew! You don't waste any fucking time, Scott! You know this nice nekkid lady?"

To his credit, naked Millikan was even blushing. When I introduced them all to each other, Katy looked Maryanne up and down slowly, lingering on her tits the way women will, then said, "Hey. Connie shows up anytime soon, we can compare notes."

Letting Maryanne know where she'd been. Maryanne looked at me, bit her lip, made a little crooked smile, and shrugged. I felt something cold touch my spine, making my balls pull in a bit. I looked down the hill again, toward the shining sea. People were coming out of the bushes everywhere, milling, calling out to one another.

Down there, most likely not far away, a pretty blonde woman of about thirty is inspecting her right wrist, and wondering what the hell she did wrong. Wonder what I'll say if I run into her?

Somewhere nearby, maybe just beyond the trees, an elephant howled and then we heard a man's terrified scream. Millikan spun, looking toward the sound, then over his shoulder at me. "I guess I wasn't paying attention when the Gods did their bit. Did they say anything about the animals coming here too?"

Gods? As in, *I'm not the only one was told where we are?* I said, "You got a nice ass, Ben."

He gave me a weird look, then turned back to the woods. You could see a fucking elephant in there, a big gray shadow, blundering about among the pine trees, getting all tangled up, thrashing this way and that. In front of it, you could see a big fat white guy running our way. Every once in a while he'd look over his shoulder, scream, trip and fall, get up and stumble on.

Maryanne said, "The trees came to Heaven with us, why not an elephant?"

I put my arm around her waist, and said, "Long as you're here, the details don't matter."

She twisted in my grasp, trying to look me in the eye. I started to rear back, and realized with a jolt that the far-sightedness that'd been building as I moved through my late forties and into my fifties was gone.

She said, "Even if Connie shows up and changes her mind?"

I smiled. "Especially then."

That still, solemn look. "And what about the other one?"

I took a deep breath. "When Lara took that razor to her wrist, she knew who would find her in the morning. I've had twenty years to think on that."

A slow nod. "I've got a past of my own. You never asked."

"If it matters, you'll let me know. Until then . . . look!" A gesture with my free arm, downslope toward the deepening mist. "Everybody and everything that ever was is here in this valley. We . . ."

The fat guy came out of the trees stumbling, still looking back, though the elephant seemed to have given up, stuck in a tangle of fallen trees, confused. I waved my arm. "Paulie! This way!"

Maryanne nuzzled close to my ear and whispered, "Shut up! Maybe he won't see us."

He ran straight across the sloping ground toward the hill, tripping again, running slower, then slower still. Just before he got to the steeper part, leading up to where the four of us stood, he turned away, running parallel to the base, then turning at an angle away from us again.

Gasping. Gasping for breath.

Suddenly, he screamed, "*Julia!* Julia, *wait!*"

I turned and looked. There. Naked, long hair streaming out behind her, running away, toward another patch of dark, piney woods. Running along, holding hands with another fat man. Gary, of course, healed from the bullets and the cold.

Paulie fell down, got up, shouted, "Julia! For God's sake! Please! I *love* you!" Ran on, stumbling, following them into the trees.

Eventually, the rainout reached the point where even the spacesuits were useless, trapping us in the shelter. One night, we all pitched in and put together one of best dinners I ever had. Cornish hens. Brussels sprouts. Baked potato. Cornbread stuffing. Salad with balsamic vinaigrette dressing. We were all crowded into the Staff Quarters kitchen, working on our favorite things, bumping into each other, laughing about silly little shit, like old times, like we were, somehow, having the life we'd always wanted, maybe even the life we deserved. There was chicken giblet gravy. Real butter. Sour cream.

Everybody had their own favorite wine, from Julia's snobby chicken-appropriate dry white whatever, to my own beer stein full of tawny port. I lifted it now and looked at them. Silence? Not quite. In the background, you could hear a soft drumming sound, rather a slow drum right now, the dull, intermittent thud of exploding oxygen rain.

"Here's to us," I said, "here and now."

Paul picked up a champagne flute of Black Opal something or other. "Not the things that were. Not the things that might have been. Just us."

Julia looked at him, seeming surprised.

"Good one, Paulie." Wish you'd been thinking that way back when life was real and there were things we were maybe going to do and be. We ate quietly for a while, most of the noise coming from Paul, who'd never learned to chew with his mouth shut. Hell. It's just defiance. Somewhere, his dead parents are still looking over his shoulder, yelling at him, wringing their hands in despair because he won't do what they want.

Overhead, the sound of the rain grew louder for a moment, then softened again. Like someone far above had dumped an extra-big bucket of

droplets on us, just for fun. Connie put down her fork and looked up at the ceiling, as if inspecting it for water stains.

Conniekins, if *this* roof starts leaking, we are fucked.

She said, "Is it going to stay like this?"

"We don't know."

Paul grimaced. "Yeah we do. In a few days it'll be like real rain, a downpour."

"Well, we only imagine that, Paulie. And we've been wrong about a *lot*. Remember?"

"Look. Right now, it's just getting started. The droplets are coming down slow because they're low density and falling through gaseous air. But it's the *air* that's falling! The atmospheric pressure will start to drop, more oxygen will condense out, then the nitrogen will start to go."

"I know. I know. As the pressure goes down, the drops will fall hard. Toward the end, they'll be falling like rocks."

He grinned. "Feathers in a vacuum."

Julia kept her eyes on her plate, eating slowly, as if ignoring us.

Connie said, "What'll happen to us then?"

"That's why we piled that extra dirt on the birm. Might help. Can't hurt. If things get scary, we'll go in the capsule and seal the hatches."

Her voice was soft, eyes on mine. "And . . . afterward?"

"We'll just have to see. I . . ."

The floor shuddered, rattling dishes and glasses together on the table, my wine rocking in its mug. I jumped up and ran to the lounge, looking out the big picture window into the brightly lit garage. Nothing. Bulldozer at the door. The two cars. The nose of the Cat visible in shadow. The little door up to the hotel was still sealed, containing its coffer dam of concrete and dirt.

Over my shoulder, Paulie said, "Let's go to the cupola."

I nodded, looking at the open door to the tunnel. Nothing. Darkness. "Yeah. And maybe we better think about keeping that shut when we're not down there?"

From the cupola, you could see there was a fire burning beyond our old observation hill, a big fire, enormous red flames licking skyward, pouring forth dense black clouds of smoke, like crude oil burning in a bowl, calling up images of the end of the Gulf War, when the well-heads were set off by Saddam's retreating heroes. Already, the smoke was towering up in a steep, jet-black column toward the bright green sky, with its muddy orange streaks and curls of vermilion lightning.

There were sparks of rain everywhere, falling faster now, pulling their pale blue contrails, popping as they hit the landscape, twinkling around the edges of the hot black smoke, flaring and veering from the fire.

Paul said, "Somewhere near downtown. Maybe a gas main explosion?"

"I don't think so. That's big. Farther away than you think, maybe on Palmer's Ridge. There's nothing up there but woods."

"Plane crash?"

"Jesus, Paulie. You know any planes that could fly in a minus-two-hundred atmosphere?"

The flames were getting bigger and brighter now, showing long tongues of yellow in their midst, maybe from the falling oxygen.

Connie pressed her face to the quartz, then jerked back. I touched it. Cold. Cold enough to hurt. She said, "Are we in danger?"

I said, "Whatever it is, it can't spread far. It'll go out soon enough."

Paul was looking down at the little bank of meteorological gauges in a panel below one window. "Temperature's actually up a few degrees. It's that hot. Pressure's down more than I expected. It's around twelve psi outside."

I took a deep breath, feeling my heart flutter nervously. "Still okay in here. I guess we've got a tight enough seal."

I turned and looked at the hotel. It was surrounded by a boil of pale blue fog, tower of vapor reaching for the sky. There was something wrong with the roof, maybe shingles missing now, and you could see the occasional ball of light as a raindrop would strike and flare. Leaking? Hard to say. The oxygen probably would evaporate on the wood, but . . . I said, "It's not going to last, Paulie. We need to think about closing the geothermal water valves, so we don't have a blowout when it collapses."

He said, "It'll go fast, once it gets cold enough."

"We should leave a video camera running in here, once we do. So we'll have a tape, after. . . ." *After?* Christ. *What* after?

Paulie snickered, turning away toward the tunnel hatch, headed back to the Quarters, where our dinner was getting cold. When I looked at Connie, she was still staring out the window, not at the fire, not at the hotel that'd been our home for a while, but down the driveway at Gary's pickup truck. It was visibly dented, and the windshield was gone. No more than a few shards remaining, dangling around the rim, stuck together by safety-glass film. You couldn't see inside, not even when a raindrop would get in and flare up briefly blue.

Maybe they're eaten away. Maybe they're gone. She must've seen it the first time she came in here, while we were out shoveling up birm dirt. She never said a fucking word.

She turned to me and smiled, put her hand out and touched my chest, let it drift down to hold onto my belt buckle. "Come on," she said, "we can reheat our stuff in the microwave."

Greekee, greekee, greekee, greekee . . .

The nights in Heaven are dark indeed, filled with darktime noises that turn you back into a child. Greekee. Like those stickbug creatures I made up for a book I once wanted to write, about a man who didn't know who he was. All lost now.

Perhaps for the best. Somewhere in the distance, a big cat squalled, high scream falling off in a deep gurgle, some great engine dieseling away to silence. Maryanne shivered next to me, maybe the tiger-bright, maybe the nighttime cold. I put my arm around her shoulders again, welcoming the touch myself.

Oh, great. Another hard-on. She's going to get tired of this shit sooner or later.

We'd gotten a few more people together on the hilltop, mostly folks from

the Redoubt EVA crew, a few from HDC, a couple of Ben's friends, and we'd managed to uproot thorn bushes, swearing at the cuts they made, Jonas yelping when he hooked one on his dick, making a little boma round the top of the hill.

Millikan startled me by knowing how to make and use a fire drill, lighting us up a cheery little deadwood fire just as the sun sank fat and dull red-orange behind the remotest mountains.

He'd grinned at my amazement. "What the fuck did you think I was up to on all those wilderness camping vacations? You should've come along, like I said."

Maryanne nuzzled the side of my neck, then pointed up in the sky. "You suppose they have names?"

She was pointing at a little pink moon, an irregular rocky little asteroid thing that had come over the mountains a couple of hours ago, swelling as it came our way, tumbling and twinkling against the black backdrop of the sky.

I said, "If they don't, we'll just have to make some up."

There'd been three of them so far, a yellow, a blue, and now a pink, though there'd never been more than two at once. The blue one was sort of like Earth's old Moon, a round, not-quite-featureless disk that seemed far, far away.

There were other lights in the sky too, but damned few. Distant, untwinkling glints, reminding me of planets, that familiar one out there maybe Venus, a pale yellow that might be Jupiter, a pink that could be Mars. Nothing, however, that would remind you of stars, just deep, velvety black that went on and on.

On to nowhere. That's what the Gods said.

This is the Lesser Creation, infinitely folded in on itself, holding whatever the Gods felt was worth rescuing from the mistake that made us.

What happens if the Greater Gods, unknown, unknowable, find out what their tools have done? Will they sweep us away then, after all?

Maryanne stood and stretched, still looking up at the sky, shining and shadowy in the firelight, all breasts and bush and pale white skin. "You suppose we're immortal now?"

Isn't that the way it always works in these things? I said, "If it were my story, that's the way I'd have it end."

Looking out across the black, blank emptiness of the immense valley, supposedly filled with every living thing that had ever existed on the Earth, she said, "I always wondered just how bored people might get, living on forever in the hereafter."

In the end, the only decent place to ride out the rain of air, if you could call it that, turned out to be in our survival capsule bunks. Paul and Julia were hiding in theirs, separate, Connie and I together, this time in mine. In case we wound up flung across the room, at least there'd be a few less feet to fall.

We left the lights on and scrunched in there, eating lunch, listening to the roar of the rain, now more like waves at the ocean, as if heard too close up, than anything else, eating yesterday's leftovers, like nothing was

wrong, like it was raining outside on a blustery winter night in North Carolina.

Tomorrow the sun will shine, and we'll go for a nice walk in Umstead Forest, amid the leafless gray trees under a crisp, cloudless dark blue sky. And in due course, summer will come again.

We're not fifty-something, Connie. We're young. Young and beautiful. Remember?

The tuna was better for having steeped for a day, and Connie got a loaf of that really great Wellspring bread out of the cupboard. "Last one," she'd said, bracing her feet against the shivering floor, brandishing a sharp knife. Sandwiches, pickles, chips and Sealtest French Onion Dip, a plastic bottle of Welch's for me, decaffeinated diet Coke for her.

Think about it.

No matter how hard you try, Connie dearest, you ain't got time to get fat now.

I kept reaching out to touch her thighs, pat the warmth between her legs, and when we were done, we stretched out, bunk rocking gently underneath us, nuzzling our faces together. Inside her pants, my hand was nice and warm, Connie smiling against the side of my face and murmuring, "Incorrigible."

I wanted her to call me Scottie again, wanting to feel the way it would melt my heart.

BAM!

The bunk jolted so hard it threw us up in the air a bit, and, from the other side of the room, Julia screamed, a high, drawn out, wail like a special effect in some cheap movie or another.

Crack!

The capsule tilted hard, walls shuddering and groaning around us, tipping back the other way, so we fell together against the inside wall of the bunk. There was a tumbling sound from the floor, Paul cursing incoherently, not even words, near as I could tell. When I looked, he was scrambling on his hands and knees, trying to get back in bed.

Stroby out there, fluorescent lights flickering.

Ballasts failing, I guess.

I turned back to Connie, driving Paul and Julia and everything else from my head. She was scared-looking. White-faced. Wide-eyed. Eyes searching mine for something, anything.

I kissed her softly and reached under the waistband of her pants, putting my palm flat on her belly. Smiled. In the background, you could hear Julia sobbing. Nothing from Paul. Hey, Paulie. Gotcher pillow over yer head yet?

Connie seemed to smile back.

I said, "I'm glad you're brave."

The bed jerked under us and the angle of the floor steepened a bit. Outside, things were whacking and booming, so loud I couldn't imagine what was happening. Jesus! Sounds like sheets and blankets flapping on a clothesline. Gigantic sheets and blankets. In a hurricane.

She said, "I never knew I was. Until just now."

I slid my hand the rest of the way down into the warmth of her crotch,

getting my fingers where I needed them to be. Outside, there was a loud groaning sound, the sound of a giant tree falling in some logger movie. What the hell am I thinking of? *Sometimes a Great Notion?* That Paul Newman thing. The guy drowning, pinned underwater by a log. Don't laugh!

I wonder what Connie will say if I try to fuck her now? Maybe if we time it right, we can be coming just as the capsule implodes. I strangled a giggle.

Paul was saying something now. Babbling.

Connie pulled back a little, holding my face between her hands, looking at me. "I never saw two people as scared as Paul and Julia. Why aren't *you* afraid?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I guess . . . I was only ever afraid of people. This . . . Hell. I would've died someday anyway."

"Are we going to die right now?"

Outside there was another long groaning sound, followed by a deep thud, like someone slamming the hood of a 1950s-era sedan. I said, "We'll know pretty soon. One way or another."

She pressed her back into the wall, lifting her leg so she'd be more accessible, and said, "What if we live?"

I shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

It was difficult to get our pants off, scrunched in the bunk like that, but we managed, bed hopping and shuddering around us. And some time in the middle of it all, accompanied by the squeal of what might have been the wind and somebody screaming, the lights went out.

We didn't notice until afterward.

Which, when you got right down to it, came as a surprise.

Afterward?

Well.

Quiet.

Very quiet.

Paulie and I stood in our spacesuits, filling the capsule airlock, integrity checks completed, com checks completed, at the end of our last argument about whether it was reasonable to waste the air in the lock.

Hell, Paulie. We didn't arrange for anything else.

And we've got to *know*.

Dark eyes doubtful.

Sure the idiot lights show the waste pipe connection is broken, but we've still got external power! That's all we need to know. We're *safe*.

For now.

Connie was inside, manning the communication console, watching the images from our helmet cams on TV. Even Julia'd finally gotten out of her fucking bunk, though she didn't seem to have much to say anymore. Hollow-eyed. Empty.

It'd been over quicker than we expected, one final blast more or less leveling the capsule again, the same blast that broke our sewer pipe, then there was just the wind, moaning and moaning, getting softer and softer until you could hardly hear it at all.

Then you couldn't.

Turned out the lighting system was fine, the fluorescent tubes had just broken. New tubes, and then we'd stood there, Paulie dressed in jeans, a coat, combat boots, like that'd do any fucking good if the capsule blew out, huh? Me naked again.

I flinched when he said, *It's quiet outside 'cause the air's all gone.*

Connie made me get dressed again, then we had supper, breaking into our TV dinners for the first time, appallingly salty stuff I wondered if I could get used to. Assuming there would be time to get used to anything. We cleaned up the mess, ate again, fucked around with the short wave radio. Ate again. Talked about what to do. No cameras. No satellite dish. No nothing.

The valve in the airlock squealed for a while as the air rushed out, then it got quiet in there as well, Paulie looking at me through the faceplates of our helmets, and I wondered which helmet cam Connie was looking through. Did she want to see me, or see what I saw?

"Well," I said, "no time like the present."

Paul grinned. "All of a sudden, I like the past a whole lot better."

I said, "Connie? How are your instrument readings?"

Her voice was grainy but reassuringly familiar in the helmet phones. "Pressure's holding steady in here, so I guess the seal's tight. You've got twenty-three millibars in the lock."

Paul's face screwed up a little. "A lot more than on Mars!"

"Probably being kept up by outgassing from the PLSS backpacks." I pronounced it *pliss,* just like the Apollo astronauts. Christ, listen to my fucking heart! Galloping like a horse. Scared? Excited? Or just from the weight of this fucking suit?

I started to work the lock-lever, withdrawing the deadbolts from their sockets. Nothing. I nodded to Paul. "Okay."

He reached out one clumsily gloved hand, hesitated, then pulled the latch handle.

The door popped open and swung wide before we could catch it, hinges locking against their stops with a *clack*. Christ. Impossible.

Connie said, "I heard that! You guys okay? Your pressure went down to nine millibars all of a sudden."

Oh, *Mir*. The way they broke the airlock door that time. I said, "We're fine." Okay. Sound transmitted through the capsule structure and I heard it over the radio, that's all.

I expected it to be dark outside for some reason. Dark like outer space in all the movies ever made. The light out there was pale turquoise. Very pale. Very dim. But there. Mist hanging over a soft white landscape. Snow drifted here and there. Something like snow, anyway.

I got out first, bumping Paulie aside as I ducked through the door, backpack antenna scraping, though I cleared my helmet okay. I was standing on a little flat place, like a bit of front porch, with jagged edges, a piece of concrete still clinging to the capsule's hull. Beyond it, there was a long slope, gradually steepening into a canyon maybe two hundred yards away. Halfway down it, there was a big twisted hunk of something that kind of looked like a bulldozer blade.

No bulldozer, though.

The mist only went up a little ways. Above it, the sky was dark, punctured all over by the still white pinpoints of the stars. Lots of stars. Paul was standing beside me now, silent, looking around.

Little waxy snowflakes were falling, only a few, far apart, coming straight down out of the sky, bouncing when they hit. Just enough air left to slow them down. What? Noble gases?

"Look!" Beyond the mist, there was a shimmering disturbance, a ghostly white plume against the black sky, almost invisible. Paul's eyes were shining bright through his faceplate. "It's a nitrogen geyser. Like on Triton!" His little burst of laughter, pure joy, scared me a little bit.

Connie's voice rasped in the earphones. "So, what's the scoop? How long can we make it?"

I said, "Eight weeks on the capsule supplies. more if . . ."

I turned away from the geyser, turned left, toward where the Staff Quarters had been. Not a sign of anything. Twenty feet of structure, forty feet of birm, the hotel foundation. All gone. Where the storerooms had been, there was what looked like a crumpled pile of metal, some of it blue. My Camry maybe?

Paul was still staring at the geyser, lips moving. Telling himself what? I stepped forward, looking beyond him, at the jagged edge of the remaining concrete wall and the smooth curve of the partially exposed capsule. Have to do something about that. Try to cover it up with dirt or something.

What'll we use for fucking shovels?

Why didn't we put some tools in the capsule?

There was a hump in the landscape beyond it, level with the capsule, holding its own bit of concrete floor, its own little piece of wall, with a wide, corrugated metal door. My heart seemed to pulse in my chest, the proverbial skipped beat. Okay.

I hopped down, dropping heavily to the ground, almost falling. Why did I expect lowered gravity? Because I'm in a fucking spacesuit? Maybe I thought I was on the Moon. I trudged heavily over to the thing and tried climbing up onto its porch. Shit. Maybe I can reach the bottom edge of the door from here and . . .

It was stuck, coming up on one side only, and I imagined the screech of frozen wheels and rails. Silence. It only went up a couple of inches, then stuck fast, but I could shine my helmet lights underneath and see inside.

"Well, shit-fire!"

Connie said, "Scott?"

I made my own little maniac's laugh.

"Scottie?"

I turned to face Paul again, and was gratified to see I'd gotten his attention. "Looks like the Cat bay made it through. I guess we've got ourselves a vacuum-adapted halftrack."

He got laboriously down off the capsule's porch and started lumbering toward me, teetering, barely able to keep his feet. "Some of our supplies were pretty much indestructible. Air tanks. That kind of thing."

"So?"

He said, "I bet there's a lot of crap down in the gully we can salvage."

When I looked that way, I could see, beyond the mist, another ghostly nitrogen geyser, and a third one beyond that, made tiny in the distance. This, I thought, is really pretty God-damned cool.

Not much more after that.

The *Robinson Crusoe* thing. The *Swiss Family Robinson* thing. The *Farnham's Freehold* thing. Not quite the *Island in a Sea of Time* thing, eh? No Nantucket for us.

I awoke the next morning, bladder bursting, with Maryanne's taste in my mouth, Maryanne curled up beside me, sound asleep and softly snoring just as the sun was coming up like a fat pink balloon over the mountains.

I got up, stretching, creaking, stiff as hell from sleeping on the cold, cold ground, wondering why the fuck the Gods had left me a fifty-something year old man. Surely . . .

I found a little gap in the boma, already pushed open by someone else, staggered down the hillside a little way, and could wait no longer, turned and started pissing merrily away. Jonas was there, a few yards off, also pissing, and when he caught me watching, smirked, and said, "Deep, too."

There was a commotion from the slope below, and when I turned to look, there was an enormous fat woman striding along, breasts bounding up and down, belly roll wriggling. Lot of nice muscle in those haunches.

Paulie was scuttling along beside her, walking half-crabwise. "Olga. Olga, *please*. I didn't mean . . ."

She stopped and turned suddenly, planted her feet solidly about eighteen inches apart, one forward the other back, then her shoulders rotated and her fist caught Paulie in the middle of the face with a meaty *splat*. She stalked off, heading for the woods where the elephant had been yesterday.

Paulie went down on his backside, hands covering his face. When he took them away, there was plenty of blood, and I could see his nose was knocked crooked, broken maybe. "*Ow!*" He looked up at me, blood running from both nostrils, crossing his lips, dripping off his chin and down his chest, and started to cry.

That's Heaven for you.

With nothing left but the survival capsule, with it getting colder and then colder still, all that was left was for us to dig out the Cat and try to drive cross-country to the National Redoubt. All the way to Colorado. You think maybe they'll let us in *now?* Jesus.

We made it all of a hundred miles, I think.

Much over fifteen miles an hour and the fucking thing would buck and jerk and roll, Paulie bitching he couldn't make sense of the computer screen, Julia pissing and moaning and claiming she needed to puke. We stopped for a break, Connie complaining she needed to get out of the suit, went on, stopped for lunch, went on again. . . .

Maybe ten hours like that, and I was actually asleep when it happened.

I don't know. Paul was driving, Connie navigating, and there was a reek of piss in the cabin. Maybe it was the distraction Julia made once she figured out she could get the ISS ham frequency on the Cat's radio.

ISS in the sky!

This is us on the ground!

HALP! HALLLP!

I remember I woke up in something like zero gee, floating inside my suit, head spinning weirdly to the sight of Paulie on the ceiling, Julia screaming, Connie screaming, all these *crash-tinkle* noises and crumpling sounds and *we're rolling down a God damn hill!*

We came to a stop right-side up, lights out.

Julia sobbing.

Everybody else quiet.

Listen carefully.

The soft throb of the diesel at idle, softer pop and huff of the air valves, feeding the engine from all those SCUBA tanks in the trailer, the compressor, the vaporizer, the hamper of oxygen snow. . . .

Okay. Good. Nothing's broken.

Listen carefully.

No hissing noises?

"Paulie?"

"I'm all right."

Great. Who gives a fuck? I wish you were dead, Paulie. "Put on the lights."

A clattering sound. "The switch is on. Must be broken."

"Swell. Connie?"

"Here, Scott."

I got my ass on the bench seat and squirmed over somebody. There was a sweet, pissy smell, and Connie said, "Scott."

"Sorry." I rummaged in the junk on the floor, fishing in canvas tote bags, until I found a flashlight. *Click*. Yellow light picked out Paul's face, staring from the open visor of his space suit. "Scrunch down."

I got close to the window and shined the light outside. Sheer, irregular white walls on both sides, a narrowing vee of open space in front. "Shit."

Connie said, "What's out there, Scott?"

"We're in a fucking gully."

Paul made some little choking sound. "I'm . . . I didn't see. . . ."

"Move your ass out of the way."

I got in the driver's seat, got my feet on the pedals, engaged tracks and tires, and hit the gas. The engine grumbled, and something lumped around outside, but we didn't budge.

Paul said, "Probably not even on the ground."

I turned and shined the flashlight on the caulked-shut zipper. Picks and shovels bolted to the sides of this thing. Maybe . . . I looked at Paul. "Well. What do you think?"

He shut his eyes and looked for a second like he was holding his breath. After a bit, his lips started to move soundlessly. What the fuck, Paulie? Praying? Is that what we've got left? He opened his eyes, and said, "I'm so tired."

"Don't you want to try?"

Agonized look, shine in his eyes growing. Jesus, don't cry, Paulie! He said, "I've got to shit."

"Well, that's a big help."

"Please, oh. . . ." You could actually hear the sound it made when he let go, eyes squinting, mouth in a grimace.

Connie, herself already floating in piss, snarled, "Oh, fucking *Jesus!*"

I grinned. "What the hell'd you fucking *eat* yesterday?"

"Frozen tacos."

"Smart."

I shined the light out the window again, then clicked it off. Up at the top of the crevasse, you could see a sky full of stars. I said, "Look, we'll just wind up getting killed if we try to go outside now. Not to mention the wasted air. Why don't we try to get some sleep? Maybe we'll think of something in the morning."

Then I opened my eyes on darkness, wondering what time it was, wondering how long I'd been asleep. I was alone in front, sprawled in the driver's seat, feet propped up on the passenger's side, looking out the window. I could see the starry sky, no recognizable constellations. The seat was shaking gently to the soft throb of the idling diesel.

Be a pisser if it stalled while we were sleeping, huh? Never get the fucker started again in this cold. Connie was stretched out on the middle bench seat, gasping softly in her sleep, one arm outflung, resting across my right thigh.

Paul and Julia must be crammed together in back. If you could, Paulie, would you get her out of the suit for one last little fuck? Or is that me I'm thinking about?

Somebody was sniffling a bit. Not Julia.

Watching the stars, I realized I could see them slowly edge east to west. As the world turns? Still got that, at least.

What the fuck are we going to *do?*

Once the diesel runs out and the engines stop, maybe a week or ten days from now, we'll last another six or seven hours on the suit batteries, then we freeze to death.

That's all, folks?

Or we go outside, losing a cabin full of air, try to dig the fucker loose? Maybe it falls on us, or explodes or something? What if the tracks are broken? What then? What if we *do* break it loose? Can we drive it out of here? There's a winch under the front bumper. Maybe . . .

Maybe hell.

Never-say-die bullshit.

Where the hell's Superman when you fucking need him?

Maybe that other thought was the right idea.

I watched the stars in their slow, stately dance, and, after a bit, wondered why they weren't all going at the same speed, then wondering if they shouldn't be going in the same direction. That one star right there, a little brighter than the others, seeming to detach itself from the field and go diagonal. . . .

"Paulie?"

Sniffle. "Paul. Wake up."

"What the fuck do you *want?*"

Bitter. Angry. Full of . . . everything.

Everything that ever went wrong between us.

I said, "There's not enough ambient light to reflect off a big satellite now, is there?"

The scorn was, as they say, palpable. "Of *course* not."

I pointed out the window, and said, "Then what the fuck is *that?*"

The spaceship turned out to be from Colorado, investigating our mysterious infrared source, and they were impressed as hell we'd built ourselves a mooncar.

Well. You know the rest. The flight to the National Redoubt, Connie gone, then blessed Maryanne, the Expedition to the Sun, the . . . right. The End.

Maryanne kept craning her neck as we pushed our way through the tall saw-grass, trying to watch the tribe of scared-looking chimps that'd been paralleling our track for the last few days, shading her eyes and standing on tiptoe. There were big, grizzled males, females with babies, cute as hell. Watching us, staying close, but not too close.

Maryanne whispered, "What do you suppose they want?"

I hefted one of the sharpened, fire-hardened sticks we were using for spears, and said, "They probably understand that the sabertooth cats are scared of us."

It'd been about a month since our little tribe had departed the top of the hill and started working its way downslope, deeper into the Earth Bubble valley, a month we'd counted by slashes Millikan made on a stick with his first flint blade. God damn clever little son of a bitch. But he got me thinking about the things I knew too. Which got us all started thinking about what we wanted to do.

Connie hadn't turned up in that month, nor Lara, nor anybody else, fear about that meeting gradually ebbing away. But still, I wondered. If I found her, would Lara still be thirty years old? Really?

All I have left of her is hazy memories of wonderful old fucks. Were they so great? The only way I'll ever know is if she turns up and . . .

Jonas, taking point, held up one broad hand, inhaling deeply. "Smell that ocean! It's got to be around here somewhere!"

There was a fishy salt tang in the air, all right. And a shushing sound that might not be the wind. I said, "Once we get up on the dunes, we'll get a better view." Down in the hollows, all you could see was the white-ice peaks of the Ringwall.

God. Giving names to everything.

There was a sudden, booming howl, not so far away, like a mournful giant playing his tuba. The chimps jerked, looking around, panicky, bug-eyed, jabbering and gesturing, edging closer to us.

Millikan looked at me, more nervous than the chimps, and said, "What'd you say those trumpet-monsters were called?"

"Parasauralophus."

As we'd moved downslope, it quickly became obvious the life forms of the ages were arranged in rings, going backward in time as you descended toward the mist. Without a machine technology, we won't get far. The oxygen content of the air has to be different down there. And down in the mist, down in the Archaean . . .

We'd hardly gotten down to the Pleistocene border, seen our first few mammoths, before the dinosaurs started turning up. Seventy-six million years ago, the world had been full of big, fast migratory animals. And nothing here to stop them from walking uphill.

What the hell's it going to be like, when the mixing's at full boil?

And what the hell happens to me if I get fucking *killed* in here?

For some reason, the Gods didn't say.

Millikan was looking down at his spear. "This thing's not going to be much good against a Tyrannosaur."

"No shit."

Jonas crested the dune and suddenly threw himself flat. "*Jesus!*"

I slithered up beside him, pulling Maryanne along by the hand, stopping when I could peer over the dune.

Ocean. Fat, flat ocean, stretching out and out until it became unreal. Something big out there. Something big like a whale.

Maryanne said, "Oh, my God! Look!" Pointing, down at a broad white beach like a thousand Waikikis stuck together.

One of the little hairy things looked up from its forage, standing upright with a clam in one hand, a flat rock in the other. It pried the shell open and ate what was inside. Then it casually nudged the next one with its toe, nodding up at the dune. The kneeling one, a female from its hanging, hairy breasts, turned and looked up at us. Froze.

Maryanne said, "Those are *habilis,* aren't they?"

I nodded, wishing for just a second that Paulie was here, so I could say they were *tor-o-don*.

Crouching beside me, Ben Millikan grinned through his beard, and said, "God damn, this is the *coolest* thing that ever happened to me!"

Out beyond the rolling surf, something leapt from the sea, curving like a dolphin, disappearing again. Not a fish, too small to be an ichthyosaur. It appeared again, standing on its tail looking straight at us, I thought, and screamed, a familiar word-like parrot squawk.

Maryanne whispered, "Like it knows we're here, and it's glad."

Millikan laughed. "Maybe it's fucking Flipper!"

Closer now, the parasauralophus moaned, and, when I looked, the nearest chimp, a big male, was only a few yards away, eyes big and desperate. I gave a tight-lipped smile, remembering all that I'd read, and motioned for him to come on up.

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When we camped out that night, six moons appeared in the sky all at once.

Rebirth.

I can't even call it a second chance, for the first one was rigged against me, even before I squirted, *inter anem et urinam,* into the false old world.

From the lowest passes through the Ringwall, the Earth Bubble looks unreal, even more like an Impressionist canvas than the Grand Canyon, or the view southward from Kilimanjaro. From any mountain peak, you can see the world below tip away from you, tilting ever steeper as it gets farther away. From the south rim of the Grand Canyon, you can see the clouds over the North Rim angling impossibly upward.

Not here.

Here was a bowl of mist, a bowl of unknowable size, filled with a painted-on, cloud-hazy landscape, a patchy ring of green and gold and blue surrounding an abyss of dense, yellow-white fog. Down there, down in the deepest parts, was air no Phanerozoic animal could breathe. Down there was the old bacterial world that was half the history of life on Earth.

Life that the Gods felt was as much worth saving as our own.

We'd measured it, after a fashion, triangulating peaks around the Ringwall during our trek, plotting angle and azimuth on our birchbark maps as we walked around the world, day on week on month on year, slowly climbing, downward into the past, upward to the end of time.

You haven't lived, 'til you've heard a dimetrodon scream.

At some point, we guessed that the big valley was maybe a half-million miles in diameter, maybe a little more. Enough to hold everything that ever was? Maybe so. Hard to say.

It made me remember another world, that World Without End I imagined, plastered around the outside surface of Creation, the final destination for all transmigrating souls. Somewhere here, there *could* be High America, if we wanted to build it. Room enough.

But why bother?

Up here, there wasn't any wind, which was just as well, since it was colder than any Hell I'd seen since before the rainout. The pass we'd spotted months ago, spent months climbing toward, was maybe eighty thousand feet above the Endtime grassland at the foot of the Ringwall.

Hopeless.

Jonas was the one who pointed out that the air pressure wasn't changing as we went up and down the slope, suggesting that the gravity gradient here might not be the same as it was back home, and, with it, the atmospheric scale height.

Back home?

Funny to call it that.

It was never home to me.

Home only to the cheap, cheating billions who would live and die for nothing and no one.

Beside me, Maryanne said, "You look good with your gray hair and beard, Scottie. I'm glad they didn't take it away when they made us young again."

Young again?

Hardly that.

But they made us well, and that's as good as youth.

I looked down at her by my side and smiled, thinking how cheap of me it was to be looking at the vista below, when she had her eyes on me. Beyond her, all the others, some looking at the world, some up at the mountains towering on either side of the pass, others huddled in little groups, talking, about who knows what.

Ben and Katy. Jonas and his friends. The black guys from the HDC print shop, who'd seemed so glad to find us on our little hilltop that first night. Even Jake, the queer little advertising director, who'd done his best to be a nice guy instead of a manager. Interesting to see him holding hands with his new friend, Seekerhawk, one of the tall, slim brown men from a tribe who called themselves the Mother's Children.

Cro-Magnons we called them, one of the Five Races of Mankind, who swept from Africa one hundred millennia and more ago, drowning the Archaics before them.

When I looked, one of the Trolls waved: Weimaraner eyes a startling glint above a Durante nose, the whole shrouded in a bush of platinum blond hair. Five feet four, able to bend steel in his bare hands. No name. Speaking only in a cartoon jabber, like nothing you ever heard before.

The printshop guys called him Fred Flintstone for a while. Then he figured out they were laughing at him. Afterward, he was sorry about the guy that died, buried him with flowers and stone tools and cried over the grave.

The pass through the Ringwall was a short one, just a few hundred yards, the way down the other side pretty much like the one we'd followed upward, and we all stood there too, looking out and down at what lay beyond.

Orange.

If Paulie were here, would he guess this one was Kzin?

Orange vegetation I guess, orange clouds. Green water, if water it was. A funny smell, making the Neanderthal Guy point and jabber, raising his snout to the breeze, if breeze there was.

No mist here.

This valley, with no name as yet, was like some vast meteor crater, complete with central peak, rising from a ring-shaped sea holding enough water to fill the oceans of several worlds. Far away, at least another half-million miles away, was the other side of the Ringwall. Beyond it, there'll be another world, another one beyond that. . . .

It's as if I can see them out there, like dimples in some impossibly vast waffle, each one a world, sampled across time from beginning to end.

Beside me, Maryanne said, "Not just all the worlds of the old universe, but all the worlds of all the universes that ever were, or ever could have been."

I took her hand, taking the first step on the downward trail. "All of them," I said. "And all within walking distance."

An unimaginable future?

Perhaps.

I thought I'd miss you, Paulie.

But I don't. ❍

THE DEATH OF STATUES

The death of statues
begins as a slow rot
creeping up their legs.
Though it often appears
as nothing more than

the grime and soot
of accumulated ages,
its catalytic action
is that of a fungus
or deleterious moss.

At first the finer
details are erased.
The statues have
no idea what to do.
They are only statues.

Their thoughts are
imprisoned in stone.
The slow decomposition
spreads through their
torsos and penetrates

to the deepest layers
of their marble innards.
They crumble silently
in an interminable decay
as valences change and

molecules are reborn.
They collapse gracefully,
reduced and realized
by the chemistry of time
to more elemental forms.

—Bruce Boston

SITKA

William Sanders

William Sanders is a history maven. He is the only author to have twice won the short form Sidewise Award for Alternate History. His next book, *Conquest* (Wildside), is a nonfiction work about the sixteenth-century De Soto expedition. In his latest story for *Asimov's*, Mr. Sanders takes us to the early twentieth century for yet another possibly possible past.

Late in the afternoon, a little before sundown, the fog moved in off the ocean and settled in over the islands and peninsulas of the coast. It wasn't much of a fog, by the standards of Russian America in late summer; just enough to mask the surface of the sea and soften the rough outlines of the land.

On the waterfront in the town of New Arkhangelsk, on the western side of the big island that the Russians called Baranof and the natives called Sitka, two men stood looking out over the harbor. "Perfect," one of them said. "If it'll stay like this."

The other man looked at him. "Perfect, Jack? How so?"

The first man flung out a hand. "Hell, just look. See how it's hanging low over the water?"

The other man turned back toward the harbor, following his gesture. He stood silently for a moment, seeing how the fog curled around the hulls of the anchored ships while leaving their upper works exposed. The nearest, a big deepwater steamer, was all but invisible down near the waterline, yet her masts and funnels showed clear and black against the hills beyond the harbor, and the flag of the Confederate States of America was clearly recognizable at her stern.

"Perfect," the man called Jack said again. "Just enough to hide a small boat, but not enough to hide a ship. Less chance of a mistake."

He was a powerfully built young man with curly blond hair and a tanned, handsome face. His teeth flashed white in the fading light. "After all," he said, "we don't want to get the wrong one, do we, Vladimir?"

The man called Vladimir, whose last name was Ulyanov and who sometimes called himself Lenin, closed his eyes and shuddered slightly. "No, that would be very bad." His English was excellent but strongly accented. "Don't even joke about it."

"Don't worry," the younger man said. "We'll get her for you."

"Not for me. You know better than that."

"Yeah, all right. For the cause." Jack slapped him lightly on the upper arm, making him wince. "Hey, I'm a good socialist too. You know that."

"So you have assured me," Lenin said dryly. "Otherwise I might suspect—"

He stopped suddenly as a pair of long-bearded Orthodox monks walked past. Jack said, "What," and then, "Oh, hell, Vladimir, don't you ever relax? I bet they don't even speak English."

Lenin looked after the two black-robed figures and shook his head. "Two years away from the twentieth century," he murmured, "and still the largest country in the world is ruled by medieval superstition. . . ."

He turned to the younger man. "We shouldn't be standing here like this. It looks suspicious. And believe me," he said as Jack started to speak, "to the people we are dealing with, *everything* looks suspicious. Trust me on this."

He jerked his head in the direction of a nearby saloon. "Come," he said. "Let us have a drink, Comrade London."

As the two men started down the board sidewalk, a trio of dark-faced women suddenly appeared from the shadows and fell in alongside, smiling and laughing. One of them grabbed Jack's arm and said something in a language that was neither English nor Russian. "For God's sake," Jack said, and started to pull free. "Just what we need, a bunch of Siwash whores."

"Wait." Lenin held up a hand. "Let them join us for now. With them along, no one will wonder what we are doing here."

"Huh. Yeah, all right. Good idea." Jack looked at the three women. They weren't bad-looking in a shabby sort of way. The one holding his arm had red ribbons in her long black hair. He laughed. "Too bad I'm going to be kind of busy this evening. Give them a bath, they might be good for some fun."

Lenin's nose twitched slightly. "You're not serious."

"Hell, no. I may be down on my luck but I'm still a white man."

Lenin winced. "Jack, I've got to talk to you some time about your—"

The saloon door swung open and a couple of drunken Cossacks staggered out, leaning on the unpainted timber wall for support. When they were past, Lenin led the way through the narrow doorway and into a long, low-ceilinged, poorly lit room full of rough wooden tables and benches where men, and a few women, sat drinking and talking and playing cards. An old man rested on a tall stool near the door, playing a slow minor-key tune on an accordion. The air was dense with smoke from cheap *mahorka* tobacco.

"There," Lenin said. "In the back, by the wall, where we can watch the door."

He strode up to the bar, pushing past a group of sailors in the white summer uniform of the Imperial German navy, and came back a moment later carrying a bottle and a couple of glasses. "One minute," he said, setting the glasses down and pouring, while Jack dragged up a bench and sat down. "I've got an idea."

Stepping over to the next table, Lenin beckoned to the three women.

They looked blank. "Come," he said, in Russian and then in English, and at last they giggled in unison and moved over to join him. "Here." He set the bottle in the center of the table, making exaggerated sit-down motions with his free hand. "*Sadityes*'. You sit here," he said, speaking very slowly. He touched the bottle. "You can have this. *Ponimaitye?*"

As they seated themselves, with another flurry of giggles, Lenin came back and sat down across from Jack. "There," he said. "That's the only table in the place close enough for anyone to overhear us. Better to have it occupied by harmless idiots."

Jack snorted. "For God's sake, Vladimir!"

"Laugh if you like," Lenin said. "I don't take risks. Already I have been arrested—"

"Me too."

"Pardon me." Lenin's voice was very flat. "You have been arrested by stupid American policemen, who beat you and threw you in a cell for a few days and then made you leave town and forgot about you. You have been detained briefly, at a military outpost, for prospecting for gold without a permit. You have no idea what a Cheka interrogation is like. Or," he said, "what it is like to live under the eyes of a vigilant and well-organized secret police force and their network of informers."

He lifted his glass. "What is that American idiom? 'The walls have ears,' yes? In the Russian Empire they have both ears and eyes—and feet, to run and tell the men with the big boots what you say and do. Until you have been stepped on by those boots, you have no business to laugh at the caution of those who have."

At the next table the woman with the red ribbons in her hair said, "I'm looking at him and I still don't believe it."

She said it in a language that was not spoken anywhere in that world.

The woman beside her pushed back her own hair, which was done up in thick braids that hung down to the swell of her bosom under her trade-blanket coat. She said in the same language, "Well, he *was* one of the great figures of history, for better or worse."

"Not Lenin," the woman with the red ribbons said impatiently. "Jack London. He's gorgeous. The pictures didn't even come close."

Across the table, the third woman was doing something with one of the sea-shell ornaments that dangled from her ears. She looked over at the men's table for a moment and then smiled and nodded without speaking.

"Hand me that bottle," the one with the red ribbons said. "I think I'm in love."

"Of course," Lenin said, "for me things did perhaps work out for the best. Siberia wasn't pleasant, but it gave me time to think, to organize my ideas. And then the authorities decided to send some of the Siberian exiles even farther away, to this remote American outpost of the empire, and in time this presented . . . possibilities."

Jack gave a meaningless grunt and reached for his own glass, staring off across the room. The German sailors were clustered around the accordion player, who was trying to accompany them on "Du, Du Liegst Mir

Am Herzen." Some of the Russians were giving them dirty looks but they didn't seem to notice.

"That's right," Jack muttered. "Sing, have yourselves a good time. Get drunk, find some whores, get skinned in a rigged card game. Just for God's sake don't go back to the ship tonight."

The woman with the red ribbons said, "He looks a lot younger. Than Lenin, I mean."

"Only six years' difference in their ages," the woman with the braids said. "But you're right. Or rather Lenin looks older—"

"Sh." The other woman raised a finger, still fiddling with her seashell ear pendants. "Quiet. I've almost—there. There." She dropped her hands to her lap and sat back. "Locked on and recording."

"All right," the woman with the red ribbons said. She reached up and pushed back her hair with a casual-looking motion, her hand barely brushing the area of her own ear. A moment later the woman beside her did something similar.

"Oh," the one with the red ribbons said. "Yes. Nice and clear. All this background noise, too, I'm impressed."

The one with the braids said, "Speaking of background noise, we need to generate some. We're being too quiet. We're supposed to be cheap whores drinking free vodka. Time to laugh it up again."

Lenin glanced over at the next table as the three women broke into another fit of noisy giggles. "They seem to be making inroads on that bottle," Lenin said. "If you want any more, you'd better go get it before they finish it off."

"They're welcome to it," Jack said. He looked at his own glass and grimaced. "Damn vodka tastes like something you'd rub on a horse. How the hell do you people stand it?"

"Practice."

"Yeah, well, better you than me. What I'd give for a taste of good old honest John Barleycorn."

"It's available," Lenin said. "Though probably not in a place like this. It's just very expensive, like everything else not made in Russia, thanks to the exorbitant import duties. Another blessing from our beloved official bureaucracy."

"Tell me about it," Jack said. "Came up here figuring to dig some gold, make a little something for myself instead of always being broke on my ass. Found out foreigners have to have a special permit to prospect or even to travel in the interior, no way to get it without paying off a bunch of crooks behind government desks. So I said the hell with it."

"And you were caught."

"Yep. Damn near went to jail, too, but by then I'd hit just enough pay dirt to be able to grease a certain Cossack officer. And here I am, broke on my ass again and a long way from home. I'm telling you, Vladimir," he said, "if you wanted somebody to blow up that bunch of greedy sons of bitches who run things here, I'd be your man and I wouldn't charge a nickel to do it."

He rubbed his face and sighed. "Instead I'm about to go blow the bottom out of a German battleship and kill a bunch of people who never did me any harm, all for the sake of the great workers' revolution. How about that?"

The three women exchanged looks. The one with the red ribbons said, "No." She squeezed her eyes shut. "*No*."

"So it's true." The woman with the seashell ear pendants shook her head. "Incredible."

"Watch it," the one with the braids said, breaking into a broad sloppy smile. "Lenin's already nervous—see, he's looking around again. Act drunk, damn it."

"That's easy," the woman with the red ribbons said, reaching for the vodka bottle. "After hearing that, I *need* a drink."

"In fact," Lenin said, "you are doing it for the price of a ticket back to your own country. Not that I question your socialist convictions, but right now you would blow up your own mother—"

Jack's hand shot across the table and clamped down on Lenin's forearm. "Don't you ever speak to me about my mother," he said thickly. "You got that?"

Lenin sat very still. His face had gone pale and there were pain lines at the corners of his mouth. "Yes," he said in a carefully even voice. "Yes, I apologize."

"Okay, then." Jack let go and gulped at his drink. "Just watch it."

Lenin rubbed his forearm. After a moment he said, "Go easy on that vodka. You're going to need a clear head and steady hands tonight."

Jack gave a short harsh laugh. "Save your breath. Even I'm not fool enough to tie one on when I'm going to be handling dynamite in the dark. Make a mistake with that much giant, it'd be raining Jack London for a week. Mixed up with a couple of Aleut paddlers, too, they'd never get the pieces sorted out."

He sipped his drink again, more cautiously. "Not that it's all that tricky a job," he added. "Nothing to it, really. Come alongside the *Brandenburg,* just forward of her aft turret, so we're next to the powder magazine. Arm the mine, start the timer—neat piece of work there, your pal Iosif knows what he's doing—and ease the whole thing up against the hull till the magnets take hold, being careful not to let it clang. Take the forked stick and slide the mine down under the waterline, below the armor belt, and then tell the boys to high-tail it. Hell, anybody could do it."

He grinned crookedly. "When you get right down to it, you only need me to make sure we get the right ship. Those Aleuts are the best paddlers in the world, but they wouldn't know the *Brandenburg* from the *City of New Orleans.*"

The woman with the braids said, "You know, I never believed it. I got into some pretty hot arguments, in fact. 'Ridiculous' was one of the milder words I used."

The one with the seashell ear pendants said, "Well, you were hardly alone. All the authorities agree that Jack London's involvement in the

Brandenburg affair is merely a romantic legend, circulated by a few revisionist crackpots. I don't know any responsible scholar who takes it seriously."

She chuckled softly. "And oh, is the shit going to fly in certain circles when we get back! I can hardly wait."

"Not quite true," Lenin said. "I also need you to make sure that our aboriginal hirelings don't change their minds and run away home with their advance money. If they haven't already done so."

"Oh, they wouldn't do that. See," Jack said, "they think it's a Russian ship we're after."

Lenin's eyebrows went up. "You told them that?"

"Hell, I had to tell them something. So they'll be there. The way they hate Russians, they wouldn't pass up a chance like this. Christ," Jack said, "I know we did some rotten things to the Indians in the States, but compared to what your people did to those poor devils . . ."

"Oh, yes. The exploitation of native peoples, here and in Asia, has been one of the worst crimes of the Tsarist state."

"Yeah, well," Jack said, "all I'm saying, the boys will do their job and I'll do mine. Quit worrying about it."

"Hey," the woman with the braids said. "Go easy on that stuff. You're going to make yourself sick."

"I'm already sick," the woman with the red ribbons said. "Just thinking about it, sitting here listening to them talk about it, seeing it about to happen, I'm as sick as I've ever been in my life. Aren't you?"

"Now what happens after that," Jack said, "whether things turn out the way you want, I can't guarantee. I'll sink the ship for you, but if it doesn't get you your war, don't come to me wanting a refund."

Lenin's lips twitched in what was very nearly a smile. "That," he said, "is perhaps the surest part of the entire business. Believe me, nothing is more predictable than the reaction of the Kaiser to the sinking of one of his precious warships in a Russian port."

"Really? I don't know as much as I should about things like that," Jack admitted. "Foreign rulers and all, I need to read up . . . but I can see how it would make him pretty mad. Mad enough to go to war, though?"

"Wilhelm will be furious," Lenin said. "But also secretly delighted. At last he will have a pretext for the war he has wanted for so long."

Jack frowned. "He's crazy?"

"Not mad, no. Merely a weakling—a cripple and, according to rumor, a homosexual—determined to prove his manhood by playing the great warrior."

"Ah." Jack nodded slowly. "A punk trying to pick a fight to show he's not a punk. Yeah, I know the kind. Saw a good many of them when I was riding the rails."

"Even so. Wilhelm has been looking for a fight ever since ascending the throne. Since no one has so far obliged him, he contents himself with playing the bully."

Lenin nodded in the direction of the German sailors, who were now roaring out "Ach, Du Lieber Augustin" in somewhat approximate harmony. "As for example this little 'good-will cruise,'" he said. "This series of visits to various ports by a *Hochseeflotte* battleship. Nothing but a crude show of force to impress the world."

"Showing everybody who's the boss?"

"Exactly. And therefore its destruction will be taken as a response to a challenge."

"Hm. Okay, you know more about it than I do." Jack shrugged. "Still seems pretty strange, though, starting a war hoping your own country will get whipped."

"I don't like it," Lenin said. "I am Russian, after all, and this isn't easy for me. But there is no better breeding ground for revolution than a major military defeat. Look at France."

"The Communards lost, didn't they?"

"True. They made mistakes, from which we have learned."

"If he says anything about omelettes and eggs," the woman with the red ribbons said through her teeth, "I'm going to go over there and beat his brains out with this bottle. Screw the mission and screw non-interference and screw temporal paradox. I don't care. I'll kill him."

Jack said, "You know, the joke's really going to be on you if Russia wins."

"Not much chance of that. Russia's armed forces are a joke, fit only to keep the Tatars in line and occasionally massacre a village of Jews. The officers are mostly incompetent buffoons, owing their rank to family connections rather than ability. The troops are badly trained, and their equipment is decades out of date. The German military, on the other hand, are very nearly as good as they think they are."

"Russia's a big country, though."

"Yes. A big country with too much territory to protect. A German offensive in the west, a Japanese attack in the east—it will be too much. You'll see."

"You're awfully sure the Japs are going to come into it."

"Comrade London," Lenin said softly, "where do you think our funds come from? Who do you think is paying for this business tonight?"

The three women stared at one another. "Now that," the one with the braids said after a moment, "is going to knock *everyone* on their butts."

"The Japs are bankrolling us?" Jack said incredulously. "For God's sake, why?"

"They have territorial ambitions in Asia. Russia has become an obstacle. A war in Europe would create opportunities."

"Damn." Jack looked unhappy. "I don't know if I like that part. Working for Orientals against white—all right, all right," he said quickly, seeing Lenin's expression. "I didn't say I wouldn't do it. All I want is to get back home. I don't really care if I have to go to work for the Devil."

He looked at Lenin over the rim of his glass. "If I haven't already. . . ."

* * *

"Oh, dear," the woman with the braids said. "He does have some unfortunate racial attitudes, doesn't he?"

"So did Ernest Hemingway," the one with the red ribbons said without looking up from the bottle. "And I thought we were going to have to peel you off him with a steam hose."

"The interesting question," Lenin said, "is whether the other European countries will become involved. The French may well decide that this is an opportunity to settle old scores with Germany. The others, who knows? This could turn into a general conflict, like nothing since Napoleon."

"What the hell. As long as the United States doesn't get involved," Jack said. "And that's not going to happen. We've just barely *got* an army, and they're still busy with the Indians. The Confederates, now, they just might be crazy enough to get in on it."

"If the war spreads, so much the better," Lenin said. "Because if it spreads, so will the revolution."

He took out a heavy silver pocket watch and snapped it open. "And now I think we should be going. It is still several hours, but we both have things we must do."

He started to push himself back from the table. Jack said, "Wait. Just one more thing."

Lenin sank back onto the bench. Jack said, "See, I've been thinking. Suppose somebody were to hire somebody to do something against the law. And maybe the man doing the hiring was the cautious type, and wanted to make sure the other bastard didn't get talkative afterward. Maybe the law might catch him and beat the story out of him, maybe he might just get drunk and shoot his mouth off. I mean, you never know, do you?"

Jack's voice was casual, his expression bland; he might have been asking about a good place to eat.

"But when the job involves a bomb," he said, "then there's one sure way to make sure the man *never* talks, isn't there? With the little added bonus that you don't have to pay him. Not," he added quickly, "that I'm suggesting anything. I don't really think you'd do something like that. Not to a good old revolutionary comrade."

He leaned forward, staring into Lenin's eyes. "But just in case I'm wrong, you might be interested to know that a few things have been written down and left in safe hands, and if I don't make it back tonight there are some people who will be reading them with deep interest by this time tomorrow."

Lenin sat unmoving, returning the younger man's stare, for perhaps five seconds. Then he laughed out loud. "*Nu, molodyets!*" He slapped the table with his palm. "Congratulations, Comrade London. At last you are learning to think like a Russian."

"Looks like they're leaving," the woman with the braids said. "Do we follow them, or—"

The woman with the red ribbons said, "I can't stand this."

Suddenly she was on her feet, moving very fast, brushing past Lenin and grabbing Jack by the arms, pushing him back against the wall. "Listen," she said, speaking quickly but with great care, "listen, you mustn't do this. You're about to start the most terrible war in your world's history. Millions of people will die and nothing will come of it but suffering and destruction. Listen," she said again, her voice rising. "You have a great talent—"

Jack stood looking down at her, open-mouthed, as her voice grew higher and louder. "Damn!" he said finally. "Vladimir, did you ever hear the like? Sorry, honey." He reached up and pulled her hands away, not roughly. "Me no speak Tlingit, or whatever the hell that is."

He grinned and slapped her bottom. "Run along, now. Big white brothers got heap business."

And to Lenin, "Give her a few kopecks, would you, or she'll follow me like a hound pup. And then let's get out of here."

The woman with the red ribbons said, "But I *heard* myself speaking English!"

They were climbing slowly up a hillside above the town of New Arkhangelsk. It was dark now, but the stars gave a good deal of light and the fog didn't reach this high.

The woman with the shell ear pendants, walking in the lead, said without looking around, "That's how it works. Don't ask me why. Some quirk of the conditioning program."

"It was covered in training," the third woman said. "Don't tell me you forgot something that basic. But then as much vodka as you put away, it's a wonder you can remember where you left your own ass . . . you didn't take the anti-intoxicants, did you?"

"They make my skin itch."

"Gods." The woman with the braids raised her hands in a helpless flapping motion. "You're a menace, you know? One of these days we're going to stop covering for you."

"No, we won't," the woman in the lead said. "We'll cover for her this time—going to be a job doctoring the recording, but I can do it—and we'll keep on covering for her. For the same reason she's helped cover for us, when we lost it or just blew it. The same reason everyone covers for their partners. Because when you're out on the timelines there's no one else you can depend on and when you're back home there's no one else who really knows what it was like."

She stopped. "Hold on. It's getting a little tricky."

She took out a pair of oddly shaped goggles and slipped them on. "All right," she said. "Stay close behind me. It shouldn't be much farther."

The Aleuts were waiting in the shadow of a clump of cedars as Jack came walking down the beach. "*Zdras'tye,*" one of them said, stepping out and raising a hand. "We ready. Go now?"

"*Da.* Go now." Jack's gold-field Russian was even worse than their pidgin. "Uh, *gdye baidarka?*"

"*Von tam.*" The man gestured and Jack saw it now, a long low black shape pulled up on the shore.

"*Harasho.*" Jack made a come-on gesture and the two men followed him down to the water's edge. His boots made soft crunching sounds in the damp sand. Theirs made none at all.

Together they lifted the big three-man sea kayak and eased it out until it floated free. Jack slid the heavy pack off his back, while the two Aleuts began the elaborate process of cleaning their feet and clothing, getting rid of any sand that might damage the boat's sealskin covering.

The forward paddler said cheerfully, "We go kill Russians, *da?*"

"Oh, yes," Jack said in English. "More than you know, you poor ignorant bastard. More than you'll ever know."

The woman with the red ribbons said, "I'm sorry. I let it get to me and I'm sorry." She turned her head to look at the other two. "It's just the stupid stinking *waste* of it all."

They were well up on the hillside now, sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree, facing out over the dark fog-blanketed harbor. It was the last hour before midnight.

The woman with the seashell ear pendants said, "It was a dreadful war, all right. One of the worst in all the lines—"

"Not that. All right, that too, but I meant him. Jack London," the woman with the red ribbons said. "You know what happens to him after this. He's going to ruin himself with drink and then shoot himself in another five years, and never write anything in a class with his best work from the other lines. And now we know why, don't we?"

"Guilt? Yes," the woman with the seashell ear pendants said. "Probably. But that's just it. He *is* going to do those things, just as he *is* going to sink the *Brandenburg* tonight, because he's already *done* them and there's nothing you can do about it."

She raised a hand and stroked the red-ribboned hair. "And that's what gets to you, isn't it? The inevitability. That's what gets to all of us. That's why we burn out so soon."

The woman with the braids said, "How many known timelines are there, now, that have been mapped back this far?"

"I don't know." The woman with the seashell ear pendants shrugged. "Well over a hundred, the last I heard."

"And so far not a single one where it didn't happen. One way or another, a huge and bloody world war always breaks out, invariably over something utterly stupid, some time within the same twenty-year bracket. Talk about inevitability."

"I know all that," the woman with the red ribbons said. "But this is the first time I've had to watch it happening. With someone I cared about getting destroyed by it."

She put an arm around the woman beside her and laid her head on her shoulder, making the seashell ear pendants clack softly. "How much longer?" she said.

"Not long. Any time now."

They sat looking out into the darkness, watching for the tall flame that would mark the end of yet another world. ❍

Ms. Baker's next novel of the immortal operatives of the Company, *The Life of the World to Come,* will be out later this year from Tor Books. In her new story the author looks up one of her fascinating characters from her blockbuster fantasy, "The Caravan from Troon" (*Asimov's,* August 2001), and finds that he's . . .

LEAVING HIS CARES BEHIND HIM

Kage Baker

The young man opened his eyes. Bright day affronted them. He groaned and rolled over, pulling his pillow about his ears.

After thirty seconds of listening to his brain pound more loudly than his heart, he rolled over again and stared at his comfortless world.

It shouldn't have been comfortless. It had originally been a bijou furnished residence, suitable for a wealthy young person-about-town. That had been when one could see the floor, however. Or the sink. Or the tabletops. Or, indeed, anything but the chilly wasteland of scattered clothing, empty bottles and unwashed dishes.

He regarded all this squalor with mild outrage, as though it belonged to someone else, and crawled from the strangling funk of his sheets. Standing up was a mistake; the top of his head blew off and hit the ceiling. A suitable place to vomit was abruptly a primary concern.

The kitchen? No; no room in the sink. Bathroom? Too far away. He lurched to the balcony doors, flung them wide and leaned out. A delicate peach soufflé, a bowl of oyster broth, assorted brightly colored trifles that did not yield their identities to memory and two bottles of sparkling wine spattered into the garden below.

Limp as a rag he clung to the rail, retching and spitting, shivering in his nakedness. Amused comment from somewhere roused him; he lifted his eyes and saw that half of Deliantiba (or at least the early-morning tradesmen making their way along Silver Boulevard) had watched his performance. He glared at them. Spitting out the last of the night before, he stood straight, turned his affronted back and went inside, slamming the balcony doors behind him.

With some effort, he located his dressing gown (finest velvet brocade,

embroidered with gold thread) and matching slippers. The runner answered his summoning bell sooner than he had expected and her thunder at his door brought on more throbbing in his temples. He opened to see the older one, not the young one who was so smitten with him, and cursed his luck.

"Kretia, isn't it?" he said, smiling nonetheless. "You look lovely this morning! Now, I'd like a carafe of mint tea, a plate of crisp wafers and one green apple, sliced thin. Off you go, and if you're back within ten minutes you'll have a gratuity of your very own!"

She just looked at him, hard-eyed. "Certainly, sir," she replied. "Will that be paid for in advance, sir?"

"There goes *your* treat," he muttered, but swept a handful of assorted small coins from the nearest flat surface and handed them through the doorway. "That should be enough. Kindly hurry; I'm not a well man."

He had no clean clothing, but while poking through the drifts of slightly less foul linen he found a pair of red silk underpants he was fairly certain did not belong to him, and pulling them on cheered him up a great deal. By the time he had breakfasted and strolled out to meet the new day, Lord Ermenwyr was nearly himself again, and certainly capable of grappling with the question of how he was going to pay his rent for another month.

And grappling was required.

The gentleman at Firebeater's Savings and Loan was courteous, but implacable: no further advances on my lord's quarterly allotment were to be paid, on direct order of my lord's father. Charm would not persuade him; neither would veiled threats. Finally the stop payment order itself was produced, with its impressive and somewhat frightening seal of black wax. Defeated, Lord Ermenwyr slunk out into the sunshine and stamped his foot at a pigeon that was unwise enough to cross his path. It just stared at him.

He strode away, hands clasped under his coattails, thinking very hard. By long-accustomed habit his legs bore him to a certain pleasant villa on Goldwire Avenue, and when he realized where he was, he smiled and rang at the gate. A laconic porter admitted him to Lady Seelice's garden. An anxious-looking maidservant admitted him to Lady Seelice's house. He found his own way to Lady Seelice's boudoir.

Lady Seelice was sitting up in bed, going over the books of her shipping company, and she had a grim set to her mouth. Vain for him to offer to distract her with light conversation; vain for him to offer to massage her neck, or brush her hair. He perched on the foot of her bed, looking as winsome as he could, and made certain suggestions. She declined them in an absent-minded sort of way.

He helped himself to sugared comfits from the exquisite little porcelain jar on her bedside table, and ate them quite amusingly, but she did not laugh. He pretended to play her corset like an accordion, but she did not laugh at that either. He fastened her brassiere on his head and crawled around the room on his hands and knees meowing like a kitten, and when she took absolutely no notice of that, he stood up and asked her outright if she'd loan him a hundred crowns.

She told him to get out, so he did.

As he was stamping downstairs, fuming, the anxious maidservant drifted into his path.

"Oh, dear, was she cross with you?" she inquired.

"Your mistress is in a vile mood," said Lord Ermenwyr resentfully, and he pulled her close and kissed her very hard. She leaned into his embrace, making soft noises, stroking his hair. When they came up for air at last, she looked into his eyes.

"She's been in a vile mood these three days. Something's wrong with her stupid old investments."

"Well, if she's not nicer soon, she'll find that her nimble little goat has capered off to greener pastures," said Lord Ermenwyr, pressing his face into the maidservant's bosom. He began to untie the cord of her bodice with his teeth.

"I've been thinking, darling," said the maidservant slowly, "that perhaps it's time we told her the truth about . . . you know . . . *us*."

Unseen under her chin, the lordling grimaced in dismay. He spat out a knot and straightened up at once.

"Well! Yes. Perhaps." He coughed, and looked suddenly pale. "On the other hand, there is the danger—" He coughed again, groped hurriedly for a silk handkerchief and held it to his lips. "My condition is so, ah, *tentative*. If we were to tell of our forbidden love—and then I were to collapse unexpectedly and die, which I might at any moment, how could I rest in my grave knowing that your mistress had turned you out in the street?"

"I suppose you're right," sighed the maidservant, watching as he doubled over in a fit of coughing. "Do you want a glass of wine or anything?"

"No, my darling—" Wheezing, Lord Ermenwyr turned and made his unsteady way to the door. "I think—I think I'd best pay a call on my personal physician!"

Staggering, choking, he exited, and continued in that wise until he was well out of sight at the end of the avenue, at which time he stood straight and walked on. A few paces later the sugared comfits made a most unwelcome return, and though he was able to lean quickly over a low wall, he looked up directly into the eyes of someone's outraged gardener.

Running three more blocks did not improve matters much. He collapsed on a bench in a small public park and fumed, considering his situation.

"I'm fed up with this life," he told a statue of some Deliantiban civic leader. "Independence is all very well, but perhaps . . ."

He mulled over the squalor, the inadequacy, the creditors, the wretched *complications* with which he had hourly to deal. He compared it with his former accustomed comforts, in a warm and loving home where he was accorded all the consideration his birth and rank merited. Within five minutes, having given due thought to all arguments pro and con, he rose briskly to his feet and set off in the direction of Silver Boulevard.

Ready cash was obtained by pawning one of the presents Lady Seelice had given him (amethysts were not really his color, after all). He dined pleasantly at his favorite restaurant that evening. When three large gentlemen asked at the door whether or not Lord Ermenwyr had a moment to speak with them, however, he was obliged to exit through a side door and across a roof.

Arriving home shortly after midnight, he loaded all his unwashed finery into his trunks, lowered the trunks from his window with a knotted sheet, himself exited in like manner, and dragged the trunks a quarter-mile to the caravan depot. He spent the rest of the night there, dozing fitfully in a corner, and by dawn was convinced he'd caught his death of cold.

But when his trunks were loaded into the baggage cart, when he had taken his paid seat amongst the other passengers, when the caravan master had mounted into the lead cart and the runner signaled their departure with a blast on her brazen trumpet—then Lord Ermenwyr was comforted, and allowed himself to sneer at Deliantiba and all his difficulties there as it, and they, fell rapidly behind him.

The caravan master drew a deep breath, deciding to be patient.

"Young man, your friends must have been having a joke at your expense," he said. "There aren't any country estates around here. We're in the bloody *Greenlands.* Nobody's up here but bandits, and demons and wild beasts."

"No need to be alarmed on my behalf, good fellow," the young man assured him. "There'll be bearers along to meet me in half an hour. That's their cart-track right there, see?"

The caravan master peered at what might have been a rabbit's trail winding down to the honest paved road. He followed it up with his eyes until it became lost in the immensity of the forests. He looked higher still, at the black mountain towering beyond, and shuddered. He knew what lay up there. It wasn't something he told his paying passengers about, because if he were ever to do so, no amount of bargain fares could tempt them to take this particular shortcut through the wilderness.

"Look," he said, "I'll be honest with you. If I let you off here, the next thing anyone will hear of you is a note demanding your ransom. *If* the gods are inclined to be merciful! There's a Red House station three days on. Ride with us that far, at least. You can send a message to your friends from there."

"I tell you this is my stop, Caravan Master," said the young man, in such a snide tone the caravan master thought: *To hell with him.*

"Offload his trunks, then!" he ordered the keymen, and marched off to the lead cart and resumed his seat. As the caravan pulled away, the other passengers looked back, wondering at the young man who sat down on his luggage with an air of unconcern and pulled out a jade smoking-tube, packing it with fragrant weed.

"I hope his parents have other sons," murmured a traveling salesman. Something howled in the depths of the forest, and he looked fearfully over his shoulder. In doing so, he missed seeing the young man lighting up his smoke with a green fireball. When he looked back, a bend in the road had already hidden the incautious youth.

Lord Ermenwyr, in the meanwhile, sucked in a double lungful of medicinal smoke and sighed in contentment. He leaned back, and blew a smoke ring.

"That's my unpaid rent and cleaning fee," he said to himself, watching it dissipate and wobble away. He sucked smoke and blew another.

"That's my little misunderstanding with Brasshandle the moneylender," he said, as it too faded into the pure air. Giggling to himself, he drew in a deep, deep store of smoke and blew three rings in close formation.

"Your hearts, ladies! All of you. Bye-bye now! You'll find another toy to amuse yourselves, I don't doubt. All my troubles are magically wafting away—oh, wait, I should blow one for that stupid business with the public fountain—"

When he heard the twig snap, however, he sat up and gazed into the darkness of the forest.

They were coming for him through the trees, and they were very large. Some were furred and some were scaled, some had great fanged pitilessly grinning mouths, some had eyes red as a dying campfire just before the night closes in. Some bore spiked weapons. Some bore treebough clubs. They shared no single characteristic of feature or flesh, save that they wore, all, livery black as ink.

"It's about time you got here," said Lord Ermenwyr. Rising to his feet, he let fall the glamour that disguised his true form.

"Master!" cried some of that dread host, and "Little Master!" cried others, and they abased themselves before him.

"Yes, yes, I'm glad to see you too," said Lord Ermenwyr. "Take special care with my trunks, now. I'll have no end of trouble getting them to close again, if they're dropped and burst open."

"My little lord, you look pale," said the foremost creature, doffing his spiked helmet respectfully. "Have you been ill again? Shall we carry you?"

"I haven't been well, no," the lordling admitted. "Perhaps you ought."

The leader knelt immediately, and Lord Ermenwyr hopped up on his shoulder and clung as he stood, looking about with satisfaction from the considerable height.

"Home!" he ordered, and that uncouth legion bore him, and his trunks, and his unwashed linen, swiftly and with chants of praise to the great black gate of his father's house.

The Lord Ermenwyr was awakened next morning by an apologetic murmur, as one of the maidservants slipped from his bed. He acknowledged her departure with a sleepy grunt and a wave of his hand, and rolled over to luxuriate in dreams once more. Nothing disturbed his repose further until the black and purple curtains of his bed were drawn open, reverently, and he heard a sweet chime that meant his breakfast had just arrived on a tray.

"Tea and toast, little Master," someone growled gently. "The toast crisp, just as you like it, and a pot of hyacinth jam, and Hrekseka the Appalling remembered you like that shrimp-egg relish, so here's a puff pastry filled with it for a savory. Have we forgotten anything? Would you like the juice of blood oranges, perhaps?"

The lordling opened his eyes and smiled wide, stretched lazily.

"Yes, thank you, Krasp," he said, and the steward—who resembled nothing so much as an elderly werewolf stuck in mid-transformation—bowed and looked sidelong at an attendant, who ran at once to fetch a

pitcher of juice. He meanwhile set about arranging Lord Ermenwyr's tray on his lap, opening out the black linen napery and tucking it into the lace collar of the lordling's nightshirt, and pouring the tea.

"And may I say, Master, on behalf of the staff, how pleased we are to see you safely returned?" said Krasp, stepping back and turning his attention to laying out a suit of black velvet.

"You may," said Lord Ermenwyr. He spread jam on his toast, dipped it into his tea and sucked at it noisily. "Oh, bliss. It's good to be back, too. I trust the parents are both well?'

Krasp genuflected. "Your lord father and your lady mother thrive, I rejoice to say."

"Mm. Of course. Siblings all in reasonably good health, I suppose?"

"The precious offspring of the Master and his lady continue to grace this plane, my lord, for which we in the servants' hall give thanks hourly."

"How nice," said Lord Ermenwyr. He sipped his tea and inquired further: "I suppose nobody's run a spear through my brother Eyrdway yet?"

The steward turned with a reproachful look in his sunken yellow eye. "The Variable Magnificent continues alive and well, my lord," he said, and held up two pairs of boots of butter-soft leather. "The plain ones, my lord, or the ones with the spring-loaded daggers in the heels?"

"The plain ones," Lord Ermenwyr replied, yawning. "I'm in the bosom of my family, after all."

When he had dined, when he had been washed and lovingly groomed and dressed by a succession of faithful retainers, when he had admired his reflection in a long mirror and pomaded his beard and moustaches—then Lord Ermenwyr strolled forth into the corridors of the family manse, to see what amusement he might find.

He sought in vain.

All that presented itself to his quick eye was the endless maze of halls, hewn through living black basalt, lit at intervals by flickering witchlight or smoking flame, or here and there by a shaft of tinted sunbeam, from some deep-hewn arrowslit window sealed with panes of painted glass. At regular intervals armed men—well, armed *males*—stood guard, and each bowed respectfully as he passed, and bid him good-morning.

He looked idly into the great vaulted chamber of the baths, with its tiled pools and scented atmosphere from the orchids that twined, luxuriant, on trellises in the steamy air; but none of his sisters were in there.

He leaned on a balustrade and gazed down the stairwell, at the floors descending into the heart of the mountain. There, on level below level to the vanishing point of perspective, servants hurried with laundry, or dishes, or firewood. It was reassuring to see them, but he had learned long since that they would not stop to play.

He paused by a window and contemplated the terraced gardens beyond, secure and sunlit, paradise cleverly hidden from wayfarers on the dreadful slopes below the summit. Bees droned in white roses, or blundered sleepily in orchards, or hovered above reflecting pools. Though the bowers of his mother were beautiful beyond the praise of poets, they made Lord Ermenwyr want to scream with ennui.

He turned, hopeful, at the sound of approaching feet.

"My lord." A tall servant bowed low. "Your lord father requests your presence in his accounting chamber."

Lord Ermenwyr bared his teeth like a weasel at bay. All his protests, all his excuses, died unspoken at the look on the servant's face. He reflected that at least the next hour was unlikely to be boring.

"Very well, then," he said, and followed where the servant led him.

By the time he had crossed the threshold, he had adopted a suitably insouciant attitude and compiled a list of clever things to say. All his presence of mind was required to remember them, once he had stepped into the darkness beyond.

His father sat in a shaft of light at the end of the dark hall, behind his great black desk, in his great black chair. For all that was said of him in courts of law, for all that was screamed against him in temples, the Master of the Mountain was not in his person fearful to look upon. For all that his name was spoken in whispers by the caravan-masters, or used to frighten their children, he wore no crown of sins nor cloak of shades. He was big, black-bearded, handsome in a solemn kind of way. His black eyes were calm, patient as a stalking tiger's.

Lord Ermenwyr, meeting those eyes, felt like a very small rabbit indeed.

"Good morning, Daddy," he said, in the most nonchalant voice he could summon.

"Good afternoon, my son," said the Master of the Mountain.

He pointed to a chair, indicating that Lord Ermenwyr should come forward and sit. Lord Ermenwyr did so, though it was a long walk down that dark hall. When he had seated himself, a saturnine figure in nondescript clothing stepped out of the shadows before him.

"Your report, please," said the Master of the Mountain. The spy cleared his throat once, then read from a sheaf of notes concerning Lord Ermenwyr's private pastimes for the last eight months. His expenses were listed in detail, to the last copper piece; his associates were named, their addresses and personal histories summarized; his favorite haunts named too, and the amount of time he spent at each.

The Master of the Mountain listened in silence, staring at his son the whole time, and though he raised an eyebrow now and then he made no comment. Lord Ermenwyr, for his part, with elaborate unconcern, drew out his smoking-tube, packed it, lit it, and sat smoking, with a bored expression on his face.

Having finished at last, the spy coughed and bowed slightly. He stepped back into the darkness.

"Well," said Lord Ermenwyr, puffing smoke, "I don't know why you bothered giving me that household accounts book on my last birthday. He kept *much* better records than I did."

"Fifteen pairs of high-heeled boots?" said the Master of the Mountain, with a certain seismic quality in the bass reverberation of his voice.

"I can explain that! There's only one cobbler in Deliantiba who can make really comfortable boots that give me the, er, dramatic presence I need," said Lord Ermenwyr. "And he's poor. I felt it was my duty to support an authentic craftsman."

"I can't imagine why he's poor, at these prices," retorted his father.

"When I was your age, I'd never owned a pair of boots. Let alone boots 'of premium-grade elkhide, dyed purple in the new fashion, with five-inch heels incorporating the unique patented Comfort-Spring lift.'"

"You missed out on a lot, eh? If you wore my size, I'd give you a pair," said Lord Ermenwyr, cool as snowmelt, but he tensed to run all the same.

His father merely stared at him, and the lordling exhaled another plume of smoke and studied it intently. When he had begun to sweat in spite of himself, his father went on:

"Is your apothecary an authentic craftsman too?"

"You can't expect me to survive without my medication!" Lord Ermenwyr cried. "And it's damned expensive in a city, you know."

"For what you spent, you might have kept three of yourselves alive," said his father.

"Well—well, but I've been ill. More so than usually, I mean. I had fevers—and I've had this persistent racking cough—blinding headaches when I wake up every morning—and see how pale I am?" Lord Ermenwyr stammered. His father leaned forward and grinned, with his teeth very white in his black beard.

"There's nothing wrong with you, boy, that a good sweat won't cure. The exercise yard, quick march! Let's see if you've remembered your training."

"Just what I expected," said the Master of the Mountain, as his son was carried from the exercise yard on a stretcher. Lord Ermenwyr, too winded to respond, glared at his father.

"And get that look off your face, boy. This is what comes of all those bottles of violet liqueur and vanilla éclairs," continued his father, pulling off his great gauntlets. "And the late nights. And the later mornings." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, where a bruise was swelling. "Your reflexes aren't bad, though. You haven't lost any of your speed, I'll say that much for you."

"Thank you," Lord Ermenwyr wheezed, with as much sarcasm as he could muster.

"I want to see you out there again tomorrow, one hour after sunrise. We'll start with saber drill, and then you'll run laps," said the Master of the Mountain.

"On my sprained ankle?" Lord Ermenwyr yelled in horror.

"I see you've got your breath back," replied his father. He turned to the foremost guard bearing the stretcher. "Take my son to his mother's infirmary. If there's anything really the matter with him, she'll mend it."

"But—!" Lord Ermenwyr cried, starting up. His father merely smiled at him, and strode off to the guardroom.

By the time they came to his mother's bower, Lord Ermenwyr had persuaded his bearers to let him limp along between them, rather than enter her presence prostrate and ignominious.

But as they drew near to that place of sweet airs, of drowsy light and soft perfumes, those bearers must blink and turn their faces away; and though they propped him faithfully, and were great and horrible in their black livery and mail, the two warriors shivered to approach the Saint of

the World. Lord Ermenwyr, knowing well that none of his father's army could meet his mother's gaze, sighed and bid them leave him.

"But, little Master, we must obey your lord father," groaned one, indistinctly through his tusks.

"It's all right; most of the time I can't look her in the eye, myself," said Lord Ermenwyr. "Besides, you were only told to bring me to the *infirmary*, right? So there's a semantic loophole for you."

Precise wording is extremely important to demons. Their eyes (bulging green and smoldering red respectively) met, and after a moment's silent debate the two bowed deeply and withdrew, murmuring their thanks. Lord Ermenwyr sighed, and tottered on through the long grass alone.

He saw the white-robed disciples walking in the far groves, or bending between the beds of herbs, gathering, pruning, planting. Their plainchant hummed through the pleasant air like bee song, setting his teeth on edge somehow. He found his mother at last, silhouetted against a painfully sunlit bower of blossoming apple, where she bent over a sickbed.

". . . the ointment every day, do you understand? You must have patience," she was saying, in her gentle ruthless voice. She looked over her shoulder and saw her son. He felt her clear gaze go through him, and he stood still and fidgeted as she turned back to her patient. She laid her hand upon the sufferer's brow, murmured a blessing; only then did she turn her full attention to Lord Ermenwyr.

He knelt awkwardly. "Mother."

"My child." She came forward and raised him to his feet. Having embraced him, she said:

"You haven't sprained your ankle, you know."

"It hurts," he said, and his lower lip trembled. "You think I'm lying again, I suppose."

"No," she said, patiently. "You truly believe you're in pain. Come and sit down, child."

She led him into the deeper shade, and drew off his boot (looking without comment on its five-inch heel). One of her disciples brought him a stoneware cup of cold spring water, and watched with wide eyes as she examined Lord Ermenwyr's ankle. Where her fingers passed, the lordling felt warmth entering in. His pain melted away like frost under sunlight, but he braced himself for what else her healing hands would learn in their touch.

"I know what you'll tell me next," he said, testily. "You'll say I haven't been exercising enough. You'll tell me I've been eating and drinking too much. You'll tell me I shouldn't wear shoes with heels this high, because it doesn't matter how tall I am. You'll tell me I'm wasting myself on pointless self-indulgences that leave me sick and depressed and penniless."

"Why should I tell you what you already know?" his mother replied. He stared sullenly into his cup of water.

"And you'll *reproach* me about Lady Seelice and Lady Thyria. And the little runner, what's-her-name, you'll be especially sorrowful that I can't even remember the name of a girl I've seduced. Let alone chambermaids without number. And . . . and you'll tell me about all those poor tradesmen

whose livelihoods depend on people like me paying bills on time, instead of skipping town irresponsibly."

"That's true," said his mother.

"And, of course, you'll tell me that I don't really need all those drugs!" Lord Ermenwyr announced. "You'll tell me that I imagine half of my fevers and coughs and wasting diseases, and that neither relief nor creative fulfillment will come from running around artist's salons with my pupils like pinpoints. And that it all comes from my being bored and frustrated. And that I'd feel better at once if I found some honest work putting my *tremendous* talents to good use."

"How perceptive, my darling," said his mother.

"Have I left anything out?"

"I don't think so."

"You see?" Lord Ermenwyr demanded tearfully, turning to the disciple. "She's just turned me inside out, like a sock. I can't keep one damned secret from her."

"All things are known to Her," said the disciple, profoundly shocked at the lordling's blasphemy. He hadn't worked there very long.

"And now, do you know what else she's going to do?" said Lord Ermenwyr, scowling at him. "She's going to nag at me to go to the nursery and visit my bastard children."

"Really?" said the disciple, even more shocked.

"Yes," said his mother, watching as he pulled his boot back on. He started to stamp off, muttering, but turned back hastily and knelt again. She blessed him in silence, and he rose and hurried away.

"My son is becoming wise," said the Saint of the World, smiling as she watched him go.

The way to the nursery was mazed and obscured, for the Master of the Mountain had many enemies, and hid well where his seed sheltered. Lord Ermenwyr threaded the labyrinth without effort, knowing it from within. As he vaulted the last pit, as he gave the last password, his heart grew more cheerful. He would shortly behold his dear old nurse again!

Twin demonesses guarded the portal, splendid in black livery and silver mail. The heels of their boots were even higher than his, and much sharper. They grinned to see him, baring gold-banded fangs in welcome.

"Ladies, you look stunning today," he told them, twirling his moustaches. "Is Balnshik on duty?"

"She is within, little lord," hissed the senior of the two, and lifted her blade to let him pass.

He entered quite an ordinary room, long and low, with a fire burning merrily in the hearth behind a secure screen. Halfway up the walls was a mural painted in tones of pink and pale blue, featuring baby rabbits involved in unlikely pastimes.

Lord Ermenwyr curled his lip. Three lace-gowned infants snuffled in cots here; four small children sat over a shared game there, in teeny-tiny chairs around a teeny-tiny table; another child rocked to and fro on a pon-

derous wooden beast bright-painted; three more sat before a comfortable-looking chair at the fireside, where a woman in a starched white uniform sat reading to them.

". . . but the people in *that* village were very naughty and tried to ambush his ambassadors, so he put them all to the sword," she said, and held up the picture so they could all see.

"Ooo," chorused the tots.

She, having meanwhile noticed Lord Ermenwyr, closed the book and rose to her feet with sinuous grace.

"Little Master," she said, looking him up and down. "You've put on weight."

He winced.

"Oh, Nursie, how unkind," he said.

"Nonsense," Balnshik replied. She was arrogantly beautiful. Her own body was perfect, ageless, statuesque and bosomy as any little boy's dream, or at least Lord Ermenwyr's little boy dreams, and there was a dangerous glint in her dark eye and a throaty quality to her voice that made him shiver even now.

"I've come about the, er, the . . . those children I—had," he said. "For a sort of visit."

"What a delightful surprise!" Balnshik said, in well-bred tones of irony. She turned and plucked from the rocking beast a wretched-looking little thing in a green velvet dress. "Look who's come to see us, dear! It's our daddy. We scarcely knew we had one, did we?"

Baby and parent stared at one another in mutual dismay. The little boy turned his face into Balnshik's breast and screamed dismally.

"Poor darling," she crooned, stroking his limp curls. "We've been teething again and we're getting over a cold, and that makes us fretful. We're just like our daddy, aren't we? Would he like to hold us?"

"Perhaps not," said Lord Ermenwyr, doing his best not to run from the room. "I might drop it. Him. What do you mean, he's just like me?"

"The very image of you at that age, Master," Balnshik assured him, serenely unbuttoning her blouse. "Same pasty little face, same nasty look in his dear little eyes, same tendency to shriek and drum his little heels on the floor when he's cross. And he gets that same rash you did, all around his little—"

"Wasn't there another one?" inquired Lord Ermenwyr desperately.

"You know perfectly well there is," said Balnshik, watching tenderly as the baby burrowed toward comfort. "Your lord father's still paying off the girl's family, and your lady sister will never be able to hold another slumber party for her sorority. Where is he?" She glanced over at the table. "There we are! The one in the white tunic. Come and meet your father, dear."

The child in question, one of those around the table, got up reluctantly. He came and clung to Balnshik's leg, peering up at his father.

"Well, you look like a fine manly little fellow, anyway," said Lord Ermenwyr.

"You look like a very bad man," stated the child.

"And he's clever!" said Lord Ermenwyr, preening a bit. "Yes, my boy, I

am rather a bad man. In fact, I'm a famous villain. What else have you heard about your father?"

The boy thought.

"Grandpapa says when I'm a man, I can challenge you to a fight and beat you up," he said gravely. "But I don't think I want to."

"You don't, eh?" A spark of parental feeling warmed in Lord Ermenwyr's heart. "Why not, my boy?"

"Because then I will be bigger than you, and you will be old and weak and have no teeth," the child explained. "It wouldn't be fair."

Lord Ermenwyr eyed him sourly. "That hasn't happened to your Grandpapa, has it?"

"No," the child agreed, "But he's twice as big as you." He brightened, remembering the other thing he had heard about his father. "And Grandmama says you're so smart, it's such a shame you don't do something with your life!"

Lord Ermenwyr sighed, and pulled out his jade tube. "Do you mind if I smoke in here?" he asked Balnshik.

"I certainly do," she replied, mildly but with a hint of bared fangs.

"Pity. Well, here, son of mine; here's my favorite ring for your very own." He removed a great red cabochon set in silver, and presented it to the child. "The top is hinged like a tiny box, see the clever spring? You can hide sleeping powders in it to play tricks on other little boys. I emptied out the poison, for heaven's sake," he added indignantly, seeing that the hint of bared fangs was now an open suggestion.

"Thank you, Father," piped the child.

Disconsolate, Lord Ermenwyr wandered the black halls.

He paused at a window that looked westward, and regarded the splendid isolation of the Greenlands. Nothing to be seen for miles but wave upon wave of lesser mountains, forested green as the sea, descending to the plain. Far away, far down, the toy cities behind their walls were invisible for distance, and when night fell their sparkling lights would glimmer in vain, like lost constellations, shrouded from his hopeful eye.

Even now, he told himself, even now down there the taverns would be opening. The smoky dark places would be lighting their lanterns, and motherly barmaids would serve forth wine so raw it took the paint off tables. The elegant expensive places would be firing up the various patent devices that glared in artificial brilliance, and the barmaids there were all thin, and young, and interestingly depraved-looking. What *they* served forth could induce visions, or convulsions and death if carelessly indulged in.

How he longed, this minute, for a glass of dubious green liqueur from the Gilded Clock! Or to loll with his head in the lap of an anonymous beauty who couldn't care less whether he did something worthwhile with his life. What had he been thinking, to desert the cities of the plain? They had everything his heart could desire. Theaters. Clubs. Ballrooms. Possibilities. Danger. Fun. . . .

Having made his decision to depart before the first light of dawn, Lord Ermenwyr hurried off to see that his trunks were packed with new-laundered clothes. He whistled a cheery little tune as he went.

* * *

The Master and the Saint sat at their game.

They were not Good and Evil personified, nor Life and Death; certainly not Order and Chaos, nor even Yin and Yang. Yet most of the world's population believed that they were. Their marriage, therefore, had done rather more than raise eyebrows everywhere.

The Master of the Mountain scowled down at the game board. It bore the simplest of designs, concentric circles roughly graven in slate, and the playing pieces were mere pebbles of black marble or white quartz. The strategy was fantastically involved, however.

So subtle were the machinations necessary to win that this particular game had been going on for thirty years, and a decisive conquest might never materialize.

"What are we going to do about the boy?" he said.

The Saint of the World sighed in commiseration, but was undistracted. She slid a white stone to a certain position on the board.

High above them, three white egrets peered down from the ledge that ran below the great vaulted dome of the chamber. Noting the lady's move, they looked sidelong at the three ravens that perched opposite, and stalked purposefully along the ledge until the ravens were obliged to sidle back a pace or two.

"To which of your sons do you refer, my lord?" the Saint inquired.

"The one with the five-inch heels to his damned boots," said the Master of the Mountain, and set a black stone down, *click,* between a particular pair of circles. "Have you seen them?"

One of the ravens bobbed its head derisively, spread its coal-black wings and soared across the dome to the opposite ledge.

"Yes, I have," admitted the Saint.

"They cost me a fortune, and they're purple," said the Master of the Mountain, leaning back to study the board.

"And when you were his age, you'd never owned a pair of boots," said the Saint serenely, sliding two white stones adjacent to the black one.

Above, one egret turned, retraced its way along the ledge, and the one raven cocked an eye to watch it. Three white stars shone out with sudden and unearthly light, in the night heavens figured on the surface of the arching dome.

"When I was his age, I wore chains. I never had to worry about paying my tailor; only about living long enough to avenge myself," said the Master of the Mountain. "I wouldn't want a son of mine educated so. But we've spoiled the boy!"

He moved three black stones, lining them up on successive rings. The two ravens flew to join their brother. Black clouds swirled under the dome, advanced on the floating globe of the white moon.

"He needs direction," said the Saint.

"He needs a challenge," said the Master. "Pitch him out naked on the mountainside, and let him survive by his wits for a few years!"

"He would," pointed out the Saint. "Do we want to take responsibility for what would happen to the innocent world?"

"I suppose not," said the Master with a sigh, watching as his lady

moved four white stones in a neat line. The white egrets advanced on the ravens again. The white moon outshone the clouds.

"But he does need a challenge," said the Saint. "He needs to put that mind of his to good use. He needs *work*."

"Damned right he does," said the Master of the Mountain. He considered the board again. "Rolling up his sleeves. Laboring with his hands. Building up a callus or two."

"Something that will make him employ his considerable talent," said the Saint.

There was a thoughtful silence. Their eyes met over the board. They smiled. Under the vaulted dome, all the birds took flight and circled in patterns, white wings and black.

"I'd better catch him early, or he'll be down the mountain again before cockcrow," said the Master of the Mountain. "To bed, madam?"

Lord Ermenwyr rose sprightly by candlelight, congratulating himself on the self-reliance learned in Deliantiba: for now he could dress himself without a valet. Having donned apparel suitable for travel, he went to his door to rouse the bearers, that they might shoulder his new-laden trunks down the gorge to the red road far below.

Upon opening the door, he said:

"Sergeant, kindly fetch—Ack!"

"Good morning, my son," said the Master of the Mountain. "So eager for saber drill? Commendable."

"Thank you," said Lord Ermenwyr. "Actually, I thought I'd just get in some practice lifting weights, first."

"Not this morning," said his father. "I have a job for you, boy. Walk with me."

Gritting his teeth, Lord Ermenwyr walked beside his father, obliged to take two steps for every one the Master of the Mountain took. He was panting by the time they emerged on a high rampart, under faint stars, where the wall's guard were putting out the watch-fires of the night.

"Look down there, son," said the Master of the Mountain, pointing to three acres' space of waste and shattered rock, hard against the house wall.

"Goodness, is that a bit of snow still lying in the crevices?" said Lord Ermenwyr, watching his breath settle in powdered frost. "So late in the year, too. What unseasonably chilly weather we've had, don't you think?"

"Do you recognize the windows?" asked his father, and Lord Ermenwyr squinted down at the arrowslits far below. "You ought to."

"Oh! Is that the nursery, behind that wall?" Lord Ermenwyr said. "Well, what do you know? I was there only yesterday. Visiting my bastards, as a matter of fact. My, my, doesn't it look small from up here?"

"Yes," said the Master of the Mountain. "It does. You must have noticed how crowded it is, these days. Balnshik is of the opinion, and your mother and I concur with her, that the children need more room. A place to play when the weather is fine, perhaps. This would prevent them from growing up into stunted, pasty-faced little creatures with no stamina."

"What a splendid idea," said Lord Ermenwyr, smiling with all his sharp

teeth. "Go to it, old man! Knock out a few walls and expand the place. Perhaps Eyrdway would be willing to give up a few rooms of his suite, eh?"

"No," said the Master of the Mountain placidly. "Balnshik wants an *outdoor* play area. A garden, just there under the windows. With lawns and a water feature, perhaps."

He leaned on the battlement and watched emotions conflict in his son's face. Lord Ermenwyr's eyes protruded slightly as the point of the conversation became evident to him, and he tugged at his beard, stammering:

"No, no, she can't be serious! What about household security? What about your enemies? Can't put the little ones' lives in danger, after all. Mustn't have them out where they might be carried off by, er, eagles or efrits, can we? Nursie means well, of course, but—"

"It's an interesting problem," said the Master of the Mountain. "I'm sure you'll think of a solution. You're such a clever fellow, after all."

"But—!"

"Krasp has been instructed to let you have all the tools and materials you need," said the Master of the Mountain. "I do hope you'll have it finished before high summer. Little Druvendyl's rash might clear up if he were able to sunbathe."

"Who the hell is Druvendyl?" cried Lord Ermenwyr.

"Your infant son," the Master of the Mountain informed him. "I expect full-color renderings in my study within three days, boy. Don't dawdle."

Bright day without, but within Lord Ermenwyr's parlor it might have been midnight, so close had he drawn his drapes. He paced awhile in deep thought, glancing now and then at three flat stones he had set out on his hearth-rug. On one, a fistful of earth was mounded; on another, a small heap of coals glowed and faded. The third stone held a little water in a shallow depression.

To one side he had placed a table and chair.

Having worked up his nerve as far as was possible, he went at last to a chest at the foot of his bed and rummaged there. He drew out a long silver shape that winked in the light from the few coals. It was a flute. He seated himself in the chair and, raising the flute to his lips, began to play softly.

Summoning music floated forth, cajoling, enticing, music to catch the attention. The melody rose a little and was imperious, beckoned impatiently, wheedled and just hinted at threatening; then was coy, beseeched from a distance.

Lord Ermenwyr played with his eyes closed at first, putting his very soul into the music. When he heard a faint commotion from his hearth, though, he opened one eye and peered along the silver barrel as he played.

A flame had risen from the coals. Brightly it lit the other two stones, so he had a clear view of the water, which was bubbling upward as from a concealed fountain, and of the earth, which was mounding up too, for all the world like a molehill.

Lord Ermenwyr smiled in his heart and played on, and if the melody had promised before, it gave open-handed now; it was all delight, all ravishment. The water leaped higher, clouding, and the flame rose and

spread out, dimming, and the earth bulged in its mound and began to lump into shape, as though under the hand of a sculptor.

A little more music, calling like birds in the forest, brightening like the sun rising over a plain, galloping like the herds there in the morning! And now the flame had assumed substance, and the water had firmed beside it. Now it appeared that three naked children sat on Lord Ermenwyr's hearth, their arms clasped about their drawn-up knees, their mouths slightly open as they watched him play. They were, all three, the phantom color of clouds, a shifting glassy hue suggesting rainbows. But about the shoulders of the little girl ran rills of bright flame, and one boy's hair swirled silver, and the other boy had perhaps less of the soap bubble about him, and more of wet clay.

Lord Ermenwyr raised his mouth from the pipe, grinned craftily at his guests, and set the pipe aside.

"No!" said the girl. "You must keep playing."

"Oh, but I'm tired, my dears," said Lord Ermenwyr. "I'm all out of breath."

"You have to play," the silvery boy insisted. "Play right now!"

But Lord Ermenwyr folded his arms. The children got to their feet, anger in their little faces, and they grew up before his eyes. The boys' chests deepened, their limbs lengthened, they overtopped the girl; but she became a woman shapely as any he'd ever beheld, with flames writhing from her brow.

"Play, or we'll kill you," said the three. "Burn you. Drown you. Bury you."

"Oh, no, that won't do," said Lord Ermenwyr. "Look here, shall we play a game? If I lose, I'll play for you again. If I win, you'll do as I bid you. What do you say to that?"

The three exchanged uncertain glances.

"We will play," they said. "But one at a time."

"Ah, now, is that fair?" cried Lord Ermenwyr. "When that gives you three chances to win against my one? I see you're too clever for me. So be it." He picked up the little table and set it before him. Opening a drawer, he brought out three cards.

"See here? Three portraits. Look closely: this handsome fellow is clearly me. This blackavised brigand is my father. And *this* lovely lady—" he held the card up before their eyes, "is my own saintly mother. Think you'd recognize her again? Of course you would. Now, we'll turn the cards face down. Can I find the lady? Of course I can; turn her up and here she is. That's no game at all! But if you find the lady, you'll win. So, who'll go first? Who'll find the lady?"

He took up the cards and looked at his guests expectantly. They nudged one another, and finally the earthborn said: "I will."

"Good for you!" Lord Ermenwyr said. "Watch, now, as I shuffle." He looked into the earthborn's face. "You're searching for the lady, understand?"

"Yes," said the earthborn, meeting his look of inquiry. "I understand."

"Good! So, here she is, and now here, and now here, and now—where?" Lord Ermenwyr fanned out his empty hands above the cards, in a gesture inviting choice.

Certain he knew where the lady was, the earthborn turned a card over.

"Whoops! Not the lady, is it? So sorry, friend. Who's for another try? Just three cards! It ought to be easy," sang Lord Ermenwyr, shuffling them again. The earthborn scowled in astonishment, as the others laughed gaily, and the waterborn stepped up to the table.

"Stop complaining," said Lord Ermenwyr, dipping his pen in ink. "You lost fairly, didn't you?"

"We never had a chance," said the earthborn bitterly. "That big man on the card, the one that's bigger than you. He's the Soul of the Black Rock, isn't he?"

"I believe he's known by that title in certain circles, yes," said Lord Ermenwyr, sketching in a pergola leading to a reflecting pool. "Mostly circles chalked on black marble floors."

"He's supposed to be a *good* master," said the waterborn. "How did he have a son like you?"

"You'll find me a good master, poppets," said Lord Ermenwyr. "I'll free you when you've done my will, and you've my word as my father's son on that. You're far too expensive to keep for long," he added, with a severe look at the fireborn, who was boredly nibbling on a footstool.

"I hunger," she complained.

"Not long to wait now," Lord Ermenwyr promised. "No more than an hour to go before the setting of the moon. And look at the pretty picture I've made!" He held up his drawing. The three regarded it, and their glum faces brightened.

When the moon was well down, he led them out, and they followed gladly when they saw that he carried his silver flute.

The guards challenged him on the high rampart, but once they recognized him they bent in low obeisance. "Little master," they growled, and he tapped each lightly on the helmet with his flute, and each grim giant nodded its head between its boots and slept.

"Down there," he said, pointing through the starlight, and the three that served him looked down on that stony desolation and wondered. All doubt fled, though, when he set the flute to his lips once more.

Now they knew what to do! And gleeful they sprang to their work, dancing under the wide starry heaven, and the cold void warmed and quickened under their feet, and the leaping silver music carried them along. Earth and Fire and Water played, and united in interesting ways.

Lord Ermenwyr was secure in bed, burrowed down under blankets and snoring, by the time bright morning lit the black mountain. But he did not need to see the first rays of the sun glitter on the great arched vault below the wall, where each glass pane was still hot from the fire that had passionately shaped it, and the iron frame too cooled slowly.

Nor did he need to see the warm sleepy earth under the vault, lying smooth in paths and emerald lawns, or the great trees that had rooted in it with magical speed. Neither did he need to hear the fountain bubbling languidly. He knew, already, what the children would find when they

straggled from the dormitory, like a file of little ghosts in their white nightgowns.

He knew they would rub their eyes and run out through the new doorway, heedless of Balnshik's orders to remain, and knew they'd rush to pull down fruit from the pergola, and spit seeds at the red fish in the green lily-pool, or climb boldly to the backs of the stone wyverns, or run on the soft grass, or vie to see how hard they could bounce balls against the glass without breaking it. Had he not planned all this, to the last detail?

The Master of the Mountain and the Saint of the World came to see, when the uneasy servants roused them before breakfast.

"Too clever by half," said the Master of the Mountain, raising his eyes to the high vault, where the squares of bubbled and sea-clear glass let in an underwater sort of light. "Impenetrable. Designed to break up perception and confuse. And . . . what's he done to the time? Do you feel that?"

"It's slowed," said the Saint of the World. "Within this garden, it will always be a moment or so in the past. As inviolate as memory, my lord."

"Nice to know he paid attention to his lessons," said the Master of the Mountain, narrowing his eyes. Two little boys ran past him at knee level, screaming like whistles for no good reason, and one child tripped over a little girl who was sprawled on the grass pretending to be a mermaid.

"You see what he can do when he applies himself?" said the Saint, lifting the howling boy and soothing him.

"He still cheated," said the Master of the Mountain.

It was well after noon when Lord Ermenwyr consented to rise and grace the house with his conscious presence, and by then all the servants knew. He nodded to them as he strolled the black halls, happily aware that his personal legend had just enlarged. Now, when they gathered in the servants' halls around the balefires, and served out well-earned kraters of black wine at the end of a long day, *now* they would have something more edifying over which to exclaim than the number of childhood diseases he had narrowly survived or his current paternity suit.

"By the Blue Pit of Hasrahkhin, it was a miracle! A whole garden, trees and all, in the worst place imaginable to put one, and it had to be secret and secure—and the boy did it in just one night!" That was what they'd say, surely.

So it was with a spring in his step that nearly overbalanced him on his five-inch heels that the lordling came to his father's accounting chamber, and rapped briskly for admission.

The doorman ushered him into his father's presence with deeper than usual obeisances, or so he fancied. The Master of the Mountain glanced up from the scroll he studied, and nodded at Lord Ermenwyr.

"Yes, my son?"

"I suppose you've visited the nursery this morning?" Lord Ermenwyr threw himself into a chair, excruciatingly casual in manner.

"I have, as a matter of fact," replied his lord father. "I'm impressed, boy. Your mother and I are proud of you."

"Thank you." Lord Ermenwyr drew out his long smoking-tube and lit it

with a positive jet of flame. He inhaled deeply, exhaled a cloud that writhed about his head, and fixed bright eyes upon the Master of the Mountain. "Would this be an auspicious time to discuss increasing an allowance, o my most justly feared sire?"

"It would not," said the Master of the Mountain. "Bloody hell, boy! A genius like you ought to be able to come up with his own pocket money."

Lord Ermenwyr stalked the black halls, brooding on the unfairness of life in general and fathers in especial.

"Clever enough to come up with my own pocket money, am I?" he fumed. "I'll show *him*."

He paused on a terrace and looked out again in the direction of the cities on the plain, and sighed with longing.

The back of his neck prickled, just as he heard the soft footfall behind him.

He whirled around and kicked, hard, but his boot sank into something that squelched. Looking up into the yawning, dripping maw of a horror out of legend, he snarled and said:

"Stop it, you moron! Slug-Hoggoth hasn't scared me since I was six."

"It has too," said a voice, plaintive in its disappointment. "Remember when you were twelve, and I hid behind the door of your bedroom? You screamed and screamed."

"No, I didn't," said Lord Ermenwyr, extricating his boot.

"Yes, you did, you screamed just like a girl," gloated the creature. "Eeeek!"

"Shut up."

"Make me, midget." The creature's outline blurred and shimmered; dwindled and firmed, resolving into a young man.

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He was head and shoulders taller than Lord Ermenwyr, slender and beautiful as a beardless god, and stark naked except for a great deal of gold and silver jewelry. That having been said, there was an undeniable resemblance between the two men.

"Idiot," muttered Lord Ermenwyr.

"But prettier than you," said the other, throwing out his arms. "Gorgeous, aren't I? What do you think of my new pectoral? Thirty black pearls! And the bracelets match, look!"

Lord Ermenwyr considered his brother's jewelry with a thoughtful expression.

"Superb," he admitted. "You robbed a caravan, I suppose. How are you, Eyrdway?"

"I'm always in splendid health," said Lord Eyrdway. "Not like you, eh?"

"No indeed," said Lord Ermenwyr with a sigh. "I'm a wreck. Too much fast life down there amongst the Children of the Sun. Wining, wenching, burning my candle at both ends! I'm certain I'll be dead before I'm twenty-two, but what memories I'll have."

"Wenching?" Lord Eyrdway's eyes widened.

"It's like looting and raping, but nobody rushes you," explained his brother. "And sometimes the ladies even make breakfast for you afterward."

"I know perfectly well what wenching is," said Lord Eyrdway indignantly. "What's *burning your candle at both ends*?"

"Ahhh." Lord Ermenwyr lit up his smoking tube. "Let's go order a couple of bottles of wine, and I'll explain."

Several bottles and several hours later, they sat in the little garden just outside Lord Ermenwyr's private chamber. Lord Ermenwyr was refilling his brother's glass.

". . . so then I said to her, 'Well, madam, if you insist, but I really ought to have another apple first,' and that was the exact moment they broke in the terrace doors!" he said.

"Bunch of nonsense. You can't do that with an apple," Lord Eyrdway slurred.

"Maybe it was an apricot," said Lord Ermenwyr. "Anyway, the best part of it was, I got out the window with both the bag *and* the jewel case. Wasn't that lucky?"

"It sounds like a lot of fun," said Lord Eyrdway wistfully, and drank deep.

"Oh, it was. So then I went round to the Black Veil Club—but of course you know what goes on in *those* places!" Lord Ermenwyr pretended to sip his wine.

"'Course I do," said his brother. "Only maybe I've forgot. You tell me again, all right?"

Lord Ermenwyr smiled. Leaning forward, lowering his voice, he explained about all the outré delights to be had at a Black Veil Club. Lord Eyrdway began to drool. Wiping it away absent-mindedly, he said at last:

"You see—you see—that's what's so awful unflair. Unfair. All this fun

you get to have. 'Cause you're totally worthless and nobody cares if you go down the mountain. You aren't the damn Heir to the Black Halls. Like me. I'm so really important Daddy won't let me go."

"Poor old Way-Way, it isn't fair at all, is it?" said Lord Ermenwyr. "Have another glass of wine."

"I mean, I'd just love to go t'Deliatitatita, have some fun," said Lord Eyrdway, holding out his glass to be refilled, "But, you know, Daddy just puts his hand on my shoulder n' says, 'When you're older, son,' but I'm older'n you by four years, right? Though of course who cares if *you* go, right? No big loss to the Family if *you* get an arrow through your liver."

"No indeed," said Lord Ermenwyr, leaning back. "Tell me something, my brother. Would you say I could do great things with my life if I only applied myself?"

"What?" Lord Eyrdway tried to focus on him. "You? No! I can see three of you right now, an' not one of em's worth a damn." He began to snicker. "Good one, eh? Three of you, get it? Oh, I'm sleepy. Just going to put my head down for a minute, right?"

He laid his head down and was promptly unconscious. When Lord Ermenwyr saw his brother blur and soften at the edges, as though he were a waxwork figure that had been left too near the fire, he rose and began to divest him of his jewelry.

"Eyrdway, I truly love you," he said.

The express caravan came through next dawn, rattling along at its best speed in hopes of being well down off the mountain by evening. The caravan master spotted the slight figure by the side of the road well in advance, and gave the signal to stop. The lead keyman threw the brake; sparks flew as the wheels slowed, and stopped.

Lord Ermenwyr, bright-eyed, hopped down from his trunks and approached the caravan master.

"Hello! Will this buy me passage on your splendid conveyance?" He held forth his hand. The caravan master squinted at it suspiciously. Then his eyes widened.

"Keymen! Load his trunks!" he bawled. "Lord, sir, with a pearl like that you could ride the whole route three times around. Where shall we take you? Deliantiba?"

Lord Ermenwyr considered, putting his head on one side.

"No . . . not Deliantiba, I think. I want to go somewhere there's a lot of trouble, of the proper sort for a gentleman. If you understand me?"

The caravan master sized him up. "There's a lot for a gentleman to do in Karkateen, sir, if his tastes run a certain way. You've heard the old song, right, about what *their* streets are paved with?"

Lord Ermenwyr began to smile. "I have indeed. Karkateen it is, then."

"Right you are, sir! Please take a seat."

So with a high heart the lordling vaulted the side of the first free cart, and sprawled back at his ease. The long line of carts started forward, picked up speed, and clattered on down the ruts in the red road. The young sun rose and shone on the young man, and the young man sang as he sped through the glad morning of the world. ❍

CHICXULUB

Larry Niven

Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning author Larry Niven has written fiction at every length, as well as speculative articles, speeches for high schools and colleges and conventions, television scripts, political action in support of the conquest of space, graphic novels, and a couple of comic book universes. Mr. Niven has collaborated with a wide variety of authors. His most recent book, *Scatterbrain* (a retrospective anthology), was published by Tor last summer. His next novel, *Ringworld's Child,* will be out from Del Rey in July.

I spent the morning with a hoe, stooped, my eyes locked on dark dirt and growing plants. Corn plants live, potatoes live, weeds die. I choose. Mind in idle. I hadn't been watching the clouds. But the clouds were taking weird shapes, and how could I help but be aware of that?

I wasn't surprised when a voice spoke like thunder trying to whisper. "The Age of Fish is passing. The Age of Water begins. All is fluid. Old orders pass, old laws give way."

Streams of cloud, white against deep blue, shaped a dragon that covered half the sky.

I said, "Great changes are the province of dragons, not men. Dragons rule the world's water and weather. Men must still tend crops."

"I've watched you."

"Entertainment is where you find it," I said.

"Does it please you, to serve a farmer in Huy Brasil? You came as a soldier of Halceen at the world's edge."

"It pleases me," I said. I resumed my work, but the dragon was still listening, and one is polite to dragons. "In Halceen we were a farmer's sons. Six of us, and two daughters, and my mother and father-found. The crops failed." I chopped at a weed.

"There was not food for us all, so Geven and I joined the army. Regent Guppry of Halceen claims land as far as Demonhead Ridge here in Huy Brasil. He sent us here to take it."

The dragon said, "But you left the army at midnight by dark of the Moon. Why did the sentry let you go?"

"Geven had sentry duty that night."

"And why are you not killing soldiers who guard the land of Huy Brasil?"

My temper was a little of the reason my father-found sent me to join the army. I held tight to it as I said, "Regent Guppry sent fifty thousand of his army to roam across land that isn't in Halceen. Fifty thousand fewer mouths are eating Halceen's crops. We who survive will be eating Huy Brasil's crops instead, even if we do so as slaves. Kings do these things. Do I seem a fool? Huy Brasil's soldiers didn't cause famine in Halceen. Why should I kill them, or invite them to kill me?"

"Where is Geven?"

I couldn't know that. "We didn't agree. He stayed with the army. I ran when I could. Dawn found me chopping firewood with my sword, and Zel found me too. Zel, Caquix's eldest daughter. I begged her to take me as their servant, and she spoke to her father, and I thought I was safe until a dragon came."

The dragon laughed in little puffs of cloud.

"Dragon, it's very pleasant talking to you, but I wonder what sparked your interest?"

"I hold to a treaty with King Willip," the dragon said. "He does not send his army against me. I leave his citizens alone. There is no crime here, and no war. Thieves and killers are mine."

I dropped the hoe. "Yours for what? For food? Geven!" Was my brother already eaten?

"I wouldn't recognize him," the dragon said.

I set to hoeing dirt and water weeds out of Caquix's little canal.

"You came as a soldier," the dragon said. "You didn't steal. You didn't kill. Is this to be your new home, then?"

"I can hope so."

"But this is a time of change," the dragon said.

I continued my work. The canal was badly overgrown.

"Magic goes away," the dragon said, "and does not renew itself. We live in the weather and the currents in water, but storms have begun to get away from us. We glimpse worse in the future. We see shock waves move through air and water faster than a scream. Mountains of ice will crawl across the land, as they did during the previous twenty-five thousand year turn of the world's axis. All beyond our control."

"Men never did control any of that," I said. "Less magic may favor us human beings. We began to thrive when the gods started to go mythical—"

"The Jade Emperor has a plan," the dragon whispered. "The masses of rock and metal that drift about the sky are rich in magic. He will bring down a flying mountain. Its magic will last us half a turn of the night sky, another twelve thousand years. We'll use it to bring more."

"Mighty is the Jade Emperor," I said, wondering what this had to do with farmers and their dependants.

"He will land it here."

I looked up. Wispy clouds in a blue sky, and two tiny whorls that might be a dragon's eyes. I asked, "Must we move?"

"You must move as far as you can, as fast as you can. You need not be under the mountain to die. A plan was proposed to slow the falling rock,

but that task was given to . . . well, to me. My place is here, so the law will not allow another to accomplish it. I know now that I cannot slow the mountain. I have no power over rock. The mountain drifts across the sky at four hundred thousand leagues in a day. It will arrive faster than that, because it is falling. In one hundred and thirty days."

"I should tell Caquix. And Zel," I said, and wondered if I would be believed.

The dragon said, "That is your decision. I must stay; this is my place."

"Who else will you warn?"

"I will observe. I will warn the righteous."

That seemed unduly restrictive. "I will warn the rest," I said.

"Do you know how they treat mad folk in Huy Brasil?"

"Tell me."

"They give them to the dragon."

I thought it over. I set down the hoe and walked up to the house to speak to Caquix and Zel. The shapes in the clouds were dissipating. ❍

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The fighting heats up in this latest installment of the Coyote series. Events seem to be reaching a volatile turning point in the explosive . . .

INCIDENT AT GOAT KILL CREEK

Allen M. Steele

Camael, Gabriel 75, c.y. 06 / 0849—Pioneer Valley, Midland

A storm had passed over the valley during the night, leaving behind six inches of fresh snow. In the cool, clear light of morning, it lay thick upon the forest, an occasional gust of wind blowing tiny flakes off the branches, the bright sun causing them to scintillate like fairy dust as they drifted toward the ground. The snow muted all sound, turning the valley into a silent winter cathedral. Save for cakes of loose ice gliding along the half-frozen river that meandered between the mountains, nothing moved.

At the river's edge, a large brown form bobbed upon the cold water like a giant cork. Sunlight reflecting off glass caught Carlos's eyes. Training the binoculars upon the floating mass, his right forefinger found the autofocus; the image became sharper, losing its fuzziness. Even from a hundred yards uphill, he knew exactly what he was seeing: a Union Guard patrol skimmer, a flat-bottom hovercraft with a 30 mm chain gun mounted above the glass hemisphere of its forward cockpit. The top hatch between its two fans was open; as he watched, a soldier climbed up through the hatch, looked around, then disappeared into the vehicle once more.

"Can you see 'em?" Marie whispered. She lay on the ground next to him, belly-down behind the boulder that hid them from view. "How many are there?"

"Wait a minute. Still looking." The skimmer was floating next to shore; he could hear voices, unintelligible yet distinct nonetheless. Carlos panned the binoculars toward the ramp that had been lowered from the craft, but there were too many trees in the way for him to make out anyone.

Carlos lowered the binoculars, raised himself carefully into a kneeling position, and made a low chirping sound between his lips: *too-too-sweet,*

too-too-sweet, the mating call of a grasshoarder, innocuous in the woodlands unless one knew that the small birds went into hibernation during winter, and most guardsmen were too new to Coyote be aware of such things.

The signal caught Barry's attention. Thirty feet to Carlos's left, he raised his head from behind the fallen trunk of a blackwood where he and Lars were crouched. Carlos pointed to his eyes, then pointed down at the river, then traced a question mark in the air: *how many do you see?* Without hesitation, Barry raised an open hand, then added two fingers.

"Shit." Carlos settled back behind the boulders, turned to his sister. "There's seven . . . and that's just what Barry can see. No telling how many are still aboard."

"Seven? I don't think so." Frosted air drifted around Marie's mouth. "Gimme that," she said quietly, and Carlos handed the binoculars to her. She raised herself up on her elbows, took a brief look at the skimmer, then came back down again. "He's wrong. There's only six."

"How do you. . . ?"

"That's an Armadillo AC-IIb," she said, much as if she were reciting the table of elements in Bernie Cayle's science class. "Pilot, gunner, and four infantry in the back. Can't carry more than that." She caught the look in his eyes. "Sure, I'm sure. I know this stuff."

"I believe you." And it was a little scary that she would. Not so long ago she'd been a little girl playing with dolls; now her idea of fun was being able to reload a carbine in less than ten seconds with her eyes closed. That worried him; this wasn't supposed to be fun. . . .

Not a good time to reflect on these things.This was the first Union patrol anyone had ever seen in the valley. The skimmer had doubtless come upstream from the Great Equatorial River. It was a long way from home . . . and much too close to *their* home for comfort.

Another bird-call, this time from behind and to the right. He glanced back, spotted Garth crouched behind a faux-birch about ten feet away, rifle in hand. Damn it, he'd told the kid to remain with the shags where they had left them further uphill. He should have known better, though; the Thompson brothers were still new to the outfit, and wherever Lars went, Garth wasn't far behind. And neither of them were good at listening.

"Stay here," he murmured, then he crawled away from Marie, careful to keep his butt down and his rifle out of the snow as he made his way to where Barry and Lars were hiding.

"I was wrong," Barry murmured as he joined them. "There's six . . . five on the shore, one on the skimmer."

"I know. We figured that already." Carlos reached over to tap Lars's arm. "Tell your brother that when I give him an order, I want it obeyed," he said, switching to Anglo so Lars could understand him. "Got that?" Lars nodded, started to raise a hand to his jaw. "Not now! They might be on your frequency!"

"Sorry. Forgot." Red-faced, Lars lowered his hand. The Thompson brothers had subcutaneous implants that enabled them to communicate with each other. A little piece of twenty-third century tech that the kids

from the twenty-first century didn't have. But the soldiers down there would have the same thing; bird-calls and hand signals might not be as efficient, but they were less likely to be intercepted.

"Think we can take 'em?" Barry asked, speaking in Anglo as well.

Good question. Five against six. They had the advantage of surprise, along with better knowledge of the terrain; he and Barry had hiked nearly every square mile of the valley ever since they'd moved here almost three Coyote years ago, with Marie joining them as soon as she was old enough to go out with Rigil Kent. Yet this would be the first time they'd tried taking on the Union Guard, or at least in broad daylight. Before, it had always been guerilla skirmishes, night-time hit-and-run raids upon Liberty and Shuttlefield with darkness to hide them. This time it would be out in the open. And the chain-gun on that skimmer intimidated him. . . .

"We can do it. No sweat." Lars pointed down the gentle slope; even without using the binoculars, Carlos could now make out the soldiers. Five figures, standing in a circle on the riverside. A couple of cases lay open between them; two of the men were kneeling, doing something he couldn't see. "The three of us come in on this side," he went on, "and the other two come in on the other side. Box 'em in, take 'em down. . . ."

"Let me decide the plan, okay?" But he had to admit that it was a good idea. If they came in from either side, with any luck they might be able to catch them by surprise.

But what then? Shoot them down? Carlos felt a cold knot in his stomach. As much as he despised the Union, the notion of killing six men had little appeal for him. It was different for Lars and Garth, of course; the memory of the battle at Thompson's Ferry was still fresh, and they had payback coming. Carlos glanced at Barry, saw the reluctance in his friend's eyes. They'd seen death a few times, too, but unlike the brothers, they weren't eager to repeat the experience.

"All right," he murmured. "You and Barry come in from the right. I'll take Garth and Marie and circle around from the left. When we're in position, I'll get Garth to com you." It was risky, but once they were closer the soldiers might get wise to any bird-calls. "One more thing," he added. "Hold your fire until I give the signal. I want to take 'em alive if we can."

"You're crazy." Lars regarded him with disbelief. "There's a half-dozen guys down there. You think they're just going to. . . ?"

"I'm not kidding. We give 'em a chance to surrender first." Carlos stared him straight in the eye. "That's the way it is."

For a few long moments, the two of them gazed at one another, until Lars finally shrugged and looked away. "You're the chief," he mumbled, as if resenting the fact. "But if they start shooting. . . ."

"If they start shooting, we fire back. But not until." Carlos hesitated. "That skimmer's going to be a problem, though. If the pilot gets to the gun. . . ."

"Let me handle the skimmer." Barry's voice was low. "I'll circle wide, come in from the beach. If he tries anything, maybe I can pick him off first." He grinned. "And I'd love to get my hands on a skimmer, wouldn't you?"

Barry was a dead shot, and he knew how to sneak through the woods

without being heard. And, Carlos had to admit, bringing home a Union Guard skimmer would be a major coup. "You got it. Are we set?" Barry gave him a thumbs up; Lars shrugged again, his eyes on the soldiers gathered at the riverside. "All right, then," Carlos said. "We roll on my signal."

Carlos crawled back to the boulder and spent a few seconds explaining the plan to Marie and Garth. As he expected, Garth was just as reluctant as his brother about giving the patrol a chance to surrender; he insisted upon joining Lars, until Carlos pointed out that he needed to keep them separated in order to facilitate communications between the two halves of the team.

"I'm going with Lars," Marie started crawling over to where the other two were waiting.

"Oh, no, you don't." Carlos snagged his sister by the hood of her parka; it pulled back, exposing her dark brown hair, tied into a bun behind her head. "You're sticking with me."

She angrily swatted his hand away. "If Barry's going after the skimmer, then Lars is going to need back-up. Either you do it, or I will."

Marie was right; Lars couldn't handle his side alone. Carlos didn't like it very much—he was reluctant to leave his sister in a firefight—but the other reason why he wanted to keep the Thompson brothers apart from each other was that they were bloodthirsty. Thompson's Ferry had been a massacre; none of the Union soldiers who'd raided the settlement had come away alive. Perhaps they had it coming, but then again . . .

"Okay. But no firing until I say so." Marie grinned, then scuttled away, keeping low to the ground. Carlos watched her go, and prayed that he hadn't made a mistake.

Another exchange of *too-too-sweets,* and then he and Garth began to advance down the hillside, moving single-file on hands and knees, remaining behind trees and large rocks as much as possible. The deep snow muffled the sounds they made, but they were careful to avoid putting any weight upon dead branches their gloved hands discovered beneath the drifts. Once again, Carlos found himself impressed with how well Garth handled himself; the kid was only fifteen, but it was as if he'd been practicing this sort of thing his entire life. Perhaps he had; his uncle had been a Union Guard colonel, after all, before he'd decided to resign his commission and take his nephews to Coyote in search of a new life.

Carlos had been Garth's age when he'd arrived here with his own family, but he'd been very much a boy then, still thinking all this was a great adventure. His childhood ended two days after the *Alabama* party set foot on New Florida, when his father and mother had been killed by a boid. That was over fifteen Earth-years ago, and everything had been different since then. He doubted that Garth had had much of a childhood, either. No one got to savor adolescence for very long on Coyote.

The voices gradually became louder. Hearing someone laugh, he froze in place, thinking that they had been spotted. As he peered through the underbrush, though, he saw that the soldiers' backs were still turned toward him. The group was now only a few dozen feet away, gathered around two men kneeling on the riverbank. It appeared as if they were assembling some sort of instrument on a tripod. The three men standing

carried rifles, but they were still hanging by their shoulder straps; the two kneeling on the ground, he noticed, weren't wearing Union parkas, but instead catskin jackets. Civilians? What were they doing with a Union Guard patrol?

Carlos glanced back to make sure that Garth was still with him, then he motioned toward a clingberry thicket at the bottom of the slope, not far from the group. Garth nodded, and Carlos began creeping closer. They could hide there for a moment, wait until Marie, Lars, and Barry were in position. Then they might be able to . . .

A shout from the skimmer. Once again believing that they'd been seen, Carlos dropped flat to the ground. Hearing footsteps against metal, he raised his eyes; the skimmer pilot was walking across the ramp, swinging a canvas bag by its strap. He was about to hop down onto shore, when there was sharp *bang* like someone pushing a pin into a balloon, and the pilot suddenly twisted sideways and toppled off the gangway, falling into the shallow water below.

Damn it! Who'd fired? Carlos didn't have time to wonder. The men on the riverbank were already reacting to the gunshot, the soldiers reaching for their weapons, the two civilians scrambling for cover. More semi-auto gunfire, again from the other side of the riverbank. One of the soldiers brought up his carbine, began firing wildly in that direction. The two civilians threw themselves to the ground, knocking over the tripod as they covered their heads with their hands.

Carlos leaped to his feet. "Hold your fire!" he yelled. "Stop shoo. . . !"

He didn't get a chance to finish before the nearest guardsman whirled around, brought up his rifle. Carlos caught a glimpse of the black bore of the gun muzzle, and in that instant realized he had made a mistake. The soldier was no more than thirty feet away, and he was completely exposed.

Oh, shit, I'm dead. . . .

The gunshots behind him nearly deafened him. He ducked, instinctively raising his hands to his ears, but not before he saw the soldier's parka rip apart, his helmet flying off the back of his head. Carlos barely had time to realize that Garth had saved his life; remembering his own gun, he brought it up to his shoulder, aimed at the soldier turning toward them.

No time to bother with the scope; he lined up the barrel, held his breath, and squeezed the trigger. The second soldier had just enough time to take his own shot before a bullet caught him in the gut. He doubled over like someone with a bad case of stomach cramps, then another shot from somewhere behind caught him between the shoulder blades and he went down.

Carlos looked for another target, but there were none to be found. The remaining soldier lay face down a few yards away, sprawled across a patch of red snow. All that could be seen of the skimmer pilot was a pair of legs sticking up out of the water next to the craft. The hollow echoes of gunfire were still reverberating off the treeline on the other side of the river; the chill air, once fresh and clean, now reeked of gunpowder.

Carlos heard a rebel yell from a dozen yards away. Lars emerged from the undergrowth, his rifle held in both hands above his head. "Skragged

three!" he shouted. "Score for the home team!" He did a little victory dance, looking like a soccer player who'd managed to drive a ball into the opposing team's net. "We rule!"

Sickened by what he . . . what *they* . . . had just done, infuriated by how it had happened, Carlos dropped his rifle, marched out from behind the clingberry bush. "You cold son of a bitch," he snarled, "I told you not to . . ."

Lars's face changed. Arms falling to his sides, he gazed at Carlos in confusion. "Whoa, hey, wait a second . . . I didn't shoot first. *She* did."

Carlos stopped. Unable to believe what he'd just heard, he stared at Marie, who was coming out from behind a tree, rifle clasped in her hands. He was still taking in the smile on her face when he heard a voice behind him.

"Carlos? Carlos, man, is that you?"

It was one of the two civilians who had taken cover when the shooting began. Carlos had all but forgotten them, and it was only the fact that they had hugged the ground that had saved them. Carlos looked down at the person struggling to his knees, saw a face he'd almost thought he would never see again.

"Chris?" he whispered. "Chris, what the hell are you doing here?"

Gabriel 75 / 1012—WHSS *Spirit of Social Collectivism Carried to the Stars*

"Shuttle from Liberty on approach, Captain. Requesting permission to dock."

Fernando Baptiste lifted his head to peer up at the ceiling of the command center. Projected against the dome was the fourth moon of 47 Ursae Majoris-B: a vast landscape of islands, some the size of small continents, separated from one another by a sinuous maze of rivers. Above the silver-blue limb of the planet, he could make out the tiny form of the shuttle carrying the governor of the New Florida colony.

"Permission granted," Baptiste told the lieutenant seated at her console a few feet away. "Inform the matriarch that I'll meet her in the conference room on Deck 10."

She nodded, then prodded the side of her jaw as she repeated his message. Baptiste took a last glance at the section report on his lapboard, then pushed it away and carefully stood up, feeling sluggish against the pull of gravity. Nearly a week had gone past since he had been revived from biostasis; during this time, the internal gravity induced by the *Spirit*'s Millis-Clement field had been gradually increased to .68g to match Coyote's surface gravity, yet he still felt sluggish, perpetually off-balance. He wasn't the only person aboard—or at least, the only baseline human—experiencing such malaise; all around him, he observed crewmen with slumped shoulders, moving as if in slow motion.

All the same, he was looking forward to setting foot on the planet below. Before he'd been picked by the Union Astronautica to command the sixth ship to 47 Ursae Majoris, he'd spent almost his entire life on the

Moon or Mars, with most of his adulthood aboard one vessel or another. What would it be like to walk beneath an open sky, without having a pressurized dome above his head or surrounded by compartment bulkheads? It would be worth spending forty-nine years in biostasis for the simple pleasure of feeling unfiltered sunlight against his face, grass beneath his feet. Would he get a skin rash if he removed his boots? Perhaps he should query the doctor if he needed another inoculation before . . .

"I'd like to join you, Captain, if you don't mind."

Baptiste looked around, saw a tall form standing beside him. Wearing a long black robe, its cowl pulled up around his head, Gregor Hull regarded him with red eyes that gleamed softly in the darkness of the command center. Once again, the savant had come up from behind without Baptiste noticing.

"Of course," Baptiste replied. "In fact, I was about to call you." It was a lie, of course, but if the savant knew this, there was no indication on his metallic face. "Please, come with me."

"Thank you, Captain." Hull stepped aside, allowing Baptiste to lead the way to the lift. "I'm rather hopeful that the matriarch will clear up a mystery."

"Oh?" He waited until Hull was aboard the lift, then pushed the button for Deck 10. A slight jar, then the cab began to move downward. "I'm surprised. I would have thought that there was little in the universe that remained mysterious to your kind."

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you well, sir." As always, the savant's voice was dull, without inflection. Except when he laughed, and fortunately that was seldom. Laughter sounded like acoustical feedback. One more thing Baptiste disliked about savants. Perhaps he was quietly bigoted against them, but the fact remained that he'd never enjoyed their company.

"My apologies. I thought I was being sincere." Another lie, and they both knew it. "What's so mysterious?"

"Shortly after we made orbit, I attempted to make contact with one of my brother savants . . . Manuel Castro. He has been on Coyote for the past seven years. I haven't been able to hear him."

"Hear him? I don't understand."

"My kind share a symbiotic relationship." Was he imagining things, or was Hull rubbing it in, the way he phrased that? "Virtual telepathy, achieved through extra-low frequency transmissions. A sort of groupmind, if you will. It's usually short-range, but we can increase the distance by tapping into long-range communications systems. I've attempted to do this, but I haven't received any response from Savant Castro."

"Have you spoken with anyone in Liberty about it?"

"I have, yes. I was informed that Savant Castro disappeared over a month ago by local reckoning . . . about three months ago Earth time. He led a military detail to a small settlement on New Florida, to round up some colonists who had fled from Shuttlefield. Apparently there was an incident during which the soldiers were killed. When another detail was sent out to investigate, they discovered the settlement had been torched. The remains of the soldiers were found, along with those of a few of the colonists, but there was no trace of Savant Castro."

"Which means he's dead."

The savant shook his head; it was strange to see such a human gesture, and it reminded Baptiste that Hull wasn't a robot, appearances notwithstanding, but rather a human intelligence downloaded into a mechanical body. Which made savants perfect stewards of starships outbound to 47 Ursae Majoris; they remained awake while everyone else lay in a dreamless coma within their biostasis cells. The savants carried on endless philosophical arguments with each other, indulging themselves in studies of things that few people would ever understand or even deem necessary. Another aspect of their existence that made them seem so remote, so disconnected from the rest of humanity . . . but then, they preferred to refer to themselves as posthuman, didn't they?

"When one of us perishes," Savant Hull continued, "it's usually by accident. In that case, our internal systems are programmed to transmit a steady signal, indicating a state of morbidity. Since I haven't received this signal, this indicates that either Savant Castro's body has been destroyed, or that he's unable to respond."

Baptiste nodded. Total destruction seemed unlikely, at least under the circumstances Hull had just mentioned. For all practical purposes, savants were immortal, their forms designed to endure all but the harshest of conditions; the quantum comps that contained their minds were contained deep within their chests, protected by layers of shielding. If Castro was still alive, then what would prevent him from being able to contact Hull?

He was still mulling this over when the lift glided to a halt. The doors whisked open, and they stepped out into one of the short, narrow hallways that led to the concentric passageways that circled the ship's axial center. "Perhaps the matriarch will be able to tell us," Baptiste said as he led the savant to the nearest intersection and turned left. "There's probably a good explanation."

"I can already think of one." Hull stepped aside to allow a crewman to pass by. "Not for the disappearance of Savant Castro in particular, but for the general reason why."

The captain nodded, but said nothing. A revolt among the colonists. This had been foreseen by the Council of Savants even before the *Spirit* left Earth nearly a half-century ago. Four thousand people had been sent to the 47 Ursae Majoris system since 2256, aboard the four Western Hemisphere Union starships that had followed the URSS *Alabama,* itself launched in 2070. In their endless musing, the savants had come to the conclusion that the original *Alabama* colonists would resent the arrival of newcomers. The political system of the Western Hemisphere Union, based upon social collectivism, was radically different from that of the United Republic of America, which the crew of the *Alabama* had sought to escape when they'd stolen their ship from Earth orbit. Concern about the revolt was one of the reasons why Union Guard soldiers had been aboard the WHU ships sent to Coyote nearly two hundred years later. . . .

To his right, a door abruptly slid open. A sergeant-major, shaven-headed and wearing a cotton jumpsuit, stepped backward out into the corridor. "And no excuses," he was saying to someone on the other side of the

door. "When I get back, I want everyone ready for weapons drill. I don't care if . . ." Looking around to see Baptiste, he quickly snapped to attention, his right fist clamping against his chest. "Pardon me, sir!"

Baptiste casually returned the salute. "Carry on," he murmured. Just before the door shut, he caught sight of the room behind him: two dozen guardsmen, wearing identical jumpsuits, sitting on bunks or standing in the narrow aisles. Throughout the *Spirit,* there were many others just like them: men and women recently revived from biostasis, sent here as reinforcements for the troops already on the ground. Unlike the first four Union ships, which had carried mostly civilians as their passengers, only a few colonists were aboard the *Spirit.* Baptiste's mission was primarily military in nature.

This isn't why you came here, a small voice inside him said. *This isn't what you were meant to do.* And indeed, it wasn't. Until just a few days before the *Spirit* had departed from Highgate, his mission had been to bring more colonists to Coyote. That plan had been changed; now he had been sent to quell a potential uprising, by any means necessary.

That isn't for you to decide. Again, he disciplined his conscience. *You have your orders. Don't ask questions. Just carry them out.*

The conference room was located further down the corridor. The matriarch hadn't arrived yet; doubtless she was still undergoing decontamination procedures. Seating himself at the console at the end of the table, Baptiste spent a few minutes checking on the status of the heavy-lift landing vehicles that would ferry soldiers down to the planet. The wallscreen displayed the cavernous interior of Bay Four; crewmen moved around a teardrop-shaped spacecraft, loading cargo through the hatch beneath its horizontal stabilizer. The *Spirit* carried three HLLVs; he wondered how and where they'd be able to land. The shuttle fields outside Liberty weren't large enough for all of them. . . .

The door opened. He looked up to see two guardsmen step into the room. They wore winter gear and had rifles slung over their shoulders; their faces were tanned, and one had a thick beard. Union soldiers, up from the planet below; they looked like barbarians tramping through the gates. They saluted as he stood up, then assumed positions on either side of the door, making way for the woman behind them.

The matriarch looked different from the pictures of her he'd seen: auburn hair longer, now reaching her shoulders and showing streaks of gray, her stout figure no longer as full as it had once been. She wore the gold-trimmed blue robe of her office, yet its colors were faded; beneath it was a brown outfit of some sort of animal skin. Like her escorts, she showed signs of having spent the last several years in an untamed environment.

"Captain Baptiste?" she asked. "I'm Luisa Hernandez, governor of New Florida."

"A pleasure, Matriarch Hernandez." As Baptiste stepped forward to extend his hand, he noticed the holster on her belt. Why did she feel it was necessary to carry a weapon, or be accompanied by armed men? "I must confess, I'm surprised to see you so soon. I thought . . ."

"We'd meet once you landed?" A smile that quickly vanished. "I'm afraid

we can't afford the luxury of time, Captain. We're in the middle of a major military operation. In fact, I've been counting on your arrival."

"I take it that you've been waiting for us." Until now, Hull had been quietly standing off to the side. The matriarch's eyes widened a bit as she saw him; Baptiste guessed that, for an instant, she thought he was Savant Castro.

"Oh, yes." She recovered quickly, returning her attention to Baptiste. "Quite so. The fact of the matter is that we have a situation down on the planet. With your assistance, though, we may be able to bring it to a swift conclusion."

"Really?" Baptiste pulled a chair back from the table. "Please, tell me all about it."

Matriarch Hernandez ignored the offered seat. Instead, she reached into her robe, pulled out a datafiche. "This will supply most of the background," she said, holding it out to him, "but I'll make it simple. We're engaged in a manhunt for one of the original *Alabama* colonists. He now goes by the name of Rigil Kent, but his true name is Carlos Montero."

Gabriel 75 / 1038—Pioneer Valley

"C'mon, give us a break." Lars stood up from the hole he'd been digging for the last hour, rested his arms against the handle of the entrenching tool he'd taken off the skimmer. "We don't need to do this."

"You're right. We don't need to do this . . . but you do." Carlos didn't look up from the portable stove he'd set up a few yards away; the chunk of river ice he'd placed within the pot had melted, and he squatted next to the stove, patiently waiting for the water to boil. "If you're going to murder someone, then you're going to have to dig a grave for him."

"It's not murder if it's . . ." Marie caught the look in her brother's eye and stopped. The hole she'd excavated was barely deep enough for the body wrapped in a sleeping bag that lay nearby, but the ground was frozen and she had brought up almost as much rock as soil. "Never mind," she muttered, and went back to work.

Garth had completed his task a few minutes before. He stood next to the open grave, his hands thrust in the pockets of his parka. Another soldier lay nearby, also cocooned in a sleeping bag. "Go ahead," Carlos said. "Put him in. Then you're . . ."

"You put him in." The kid sullenly glared at him. "I'm done taking orders from . . ."

"Do as he says." Lars shoved the shovel blade back into the hard ground. "The sooner we're done, the sooner we're out of here." Carlos watched as Garth bent over, grasped the toe of the sleeping bag, and dragged it into the shallow grave. Stepping out of the hole, the kid hocked up a mouthful of saliva. For a moment it seemed as if he was ready to spit on the body, then he looked at Carlos, thought better of it, and swallowed. He picked up his entrenching tool and began to cover the corpse.

So much like David, Carlos thought. *Same attitude. . . .*

That was an uncomfortable thought, and he pushed it aside. The water was boiling. Carlos picked up the pot, poured water into two metal cups he'd found in the mess kit. When Barry recovered the canvas bag the skimmer pilot had dropped in the water, they discovered that its rations included a small supply of freeze-dried coffee. Neither he nor Marie nor Barry had seen instant coffee in many years . . . at least not since the last of the *Alabama*'s food supply had been used up, what seemed a lifetime ago. It was a luxury they had forgotten; no sense is letting it go to waste, yet Carlos couldn't help but feel another surge of guilt. The skimmer pilot had been doing nothing more offensive than fetching breakfast when Marie had shot him down.

Picking up the cups, he walked over to where the two prisoners were seated on a driftwood log. Kneeling in front of Constanza, he offered coffee to him. "Here you go," he said quietly. "Might warm you up a little."

Constanza remained silent. He stared at the ground between his boots, his arms wrapped tightly together against his chest, his hands bunched beneath his armpits.The fur-lined collar of his catskin jacket was pulled up around his face; his eyes gazed into some abyss only he could see.

"He's gone." Chris was sitting next to him, his ankles crossed, hands in the pockets of his jacket. "I've tried talking to him, but he's zeroed. Shock, I guess."

It was the first thing he'd said in nearly an hour. A sign of progress. Carlos silently offered the other cup of coffee to him. Chris hesitated, then reached up to take it from him. "Thanks. You're a real pal."

"You're welcome." Carlos walked over to the other end of the log, and sat down next to him. For the moment, at least, the others ignored them. Lars, Garth, and Marie continued burial detail; Barry was aboard the skimmer, trying to figure out how to operate it. Carlos sipped the hot coffee, stared at the half-frozen waters of Goat Kill Creek. "Ready to talk?"

"What are you going to do to me if I don't? Sic your girlfriend on me?"

Carlos almost spit out a mouthful of coffee. For an instant, he felt an impulse to backhand the guy seated next to him, until he remembered just how long it had been since the last time Chris had seen Marie. "That's not my girlfriend," he said. "That's my sister."

Now it was Chris's turn to sputter. He clapped a hand against his mouth as his eyes went wide in astonishment. "Holy . . . that's Marie? I didn't . . ."

"You thought she was going to stay eight forever?" Carlos shook his head. "She's seventeen, almost eighteen. Call her my girlfriend again, and we're going to have a problem." As if they didn't already.

"Sorry, man. I didn't . . ." Then Chris seemed to remember where he was. "What did you do to her? She shot Gondolfo down like it was a skeet shoot."

"I didn't . . ." Carlos let out his breath. He couldn't explain Marie's actions either; like Chris, he remembered when his little sister had been someone other than a sniper. Letting her join Rigil Kent had been a mistake; he saw that now. "Let's talk about something else, okay? Why are you here?"

For a moment, it seemed as though Chris was going to clam up again. He sipped coffee as he watched Marie and Lars dig graves; now that Garth had buried the third soldier, he was rummaging through the mess kit for something to eat. "I was their guide," he said, as if that explained everything. "Sort of their native sherpa."

"Don't lie." Carlos shook his head. "You've never been here before. Last time I heard, the matriarch made you Chief Proctor of Shuttlefield. What are you doing with a Union Guard patrol in Midland?"

"Last time *I* heard, you were going by the handle of Rigil Kent." He smiled. "I looked it up, by the way. An old European name for Alpha Centauri, the closest star to Earth, besides Sol. Good name. . . ."

"Don't change the subject. What are you doing here?"

Chris shrugged "Sure, why not? Might as well tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"We're looking for you. Your little club, I mean." He gestured toward the tripod-mounted instrument, lying up-ended upon the ground near the bullet-pocked equipment cases. "See that? It's called a SIMS . . . schematic information mapping system. Your dad would have loved it. It's right up his alley. . . ."

"Forget about my family." Carlos felt his face growing warm; whether Chris intended it or not, he was scratching an old wound. "What does it do?"

"It's a full-suite sensory package . . . infrared, motion detection, body-heat, the works. It's linked via satellite to a dozen or so like it they've been setting up all over Midland. The idea is to collect information on your people's movements. Once that info is polled, then they'll be able to predict where you're likely to be at any given time." He looked at Constanza. "It's his baby, so he might be able to explain it better. If you can get him to talk, that is."

A remote surveillance system. Carlos felt a chill that didn't come from the weather. If he and the others had been any slower coming down the hillside, the SIMS would have picked them up as soon as they were within range. The odds would have been reversed; he might have become Chris's prisoner instead, and the soldiers would have been digging graves for Marie, Lars, and Garth.

Yet that was only conjecture. Reality wasn't much more kind. Goat Kill Creek led northwest into the Pioneer Valley until it reached the southern slopes of Mt. Shaw, where Defiance was located. If Chris was telling the truth, then his people were in danger of being found by the Union.

And Defiance wasn't the only settlement at risk. During the last few months, following the sabotage of the Garcia Narrows Bridge, several hundred immigrants who had been involved in its construction had managed to establish tiny villages here and there across Midland; most were scattered along the Gillis Range, with a few as far west as the Midland Channel. It had become clear that the Union wasn't going to be content with New Florida; assuming control of the vast resources of Midland remained vital to its long-range plans, and the bloody events at Thompson's Ferry had demonstrated that Luisa Hernandez wouldn't tolerate any interference. The newcomers had already experienced the matriarch's iron

hand while living in the squatter camps of Shuttlefield, and they had no desire to do so again. Although Carlos had taken the name Rigil Kent for himself, it had since been adopted as the name of the resistance movement that so many of them had joined.

Until recently, all they had to worry about was the Union Guard garrison on New Florida. Yet a couple of days ago, another Union starship had arrived in orbit above Coyote; it could be seen from the ground at night, a bright star moving across the sky. There would be even more guardsmen aboard that ship, more soldiers to be sent into Midland in search of Rigil Kent and his followers. The rebellion was still young, and it could easily be crushed.

Carlos glanced at the scientist seated nearby. Constanza might be persuaded to reveal where the other SIMS were located, but this was not the time or place. And Carlos didn't trust Chris. Even if he wasn't lying, there was something about his story that didn't quite fit. . . .

"So why are you here?" His coffee had gone lukewarm, and he made a face as he took another sip. "Don't tell me you just wanted exercise and fresh air."

"Hey, I love the great outdoors just as much as you." Chris's expression became serious. "My mother disappeared last month. Where I come from, when people go missing, there's usually one place they go." He pointed to the ground. "You know where she is?"

"If I told you, would you help me?"

"Oh, c'mon. Get real. . . ."

"Didn't think so." Carlos stood up, tossed the rest of the coffee into the snow. "We'll take the skimmer. Your friend, too . . . he needs medical attention. I'll leave you with some rations and a compass. The East Channel's about two hundred miles from here. You should be able to find your way back."

"You wouldn't do that."

"You just said you love the great outdoors. Here's your chance to get as much as you want." Carlos started to walk away. "Nice to see you again. I'll tell your mom you said hi."

He was halfway to where the others were waiting when Chris called after him. "Okay, you win. What do you want me to do?"

Carlos turned around. "I want you to take a hike with me."

"A hike?" Overhearing this, Marie looked up from shoveling the last spadeful of dirt over Gondolfo's grave. "What do you . . . where are you taking him?"

"Back where we came from, of course." Before she could reply, Carlos stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply. Barry emerged from the top hatch of the Armadillo. Carlos gestured for him to come over, then looked at his sister again. "You guys take Mr. Constanza here. . . ."

"It's Dr. Constanza." Chris said quietly. "Enrique Constanza."

"Dr. Constanza, I mean, and take the skimmer back. Chris and I will ride the shags."

"That'll take two days, at least." Lars put down his shovel. "Why can't you. . . ?"

"The skimmer only has room for six. Counting these two, we've got sev-

en." Carlos glanced back at their two prisoners. "Kuniko should take a look at Dr. Constanza as soon as possible, so he'll go with you. Besides, we need to return the shags . . . hey, you think you can drive that thing?"

Barry had joined them by now. He shrugged. "Looks easy enough. Sort of like a maxvee, just a little different."

"I'm sure you can handle it," Carlos said. With his back turned toward Chris, he gave his friend a wink. "If we get lost, I can always call in and ask for help. Know what I mean?"

Rigil Kent avoided using satphones because they were dependent upon the *Alabama* for uplink; the Union might be able to triangulate their position by monitoring the downlink. They carried short-range radios instead, but observed radio silence except in case of emergency. Barry understood his meaning; he gave a brief nod. "This is stupid," Marie said. "Someone can just hang onto the hatch, ride outside. We can be home in just a few . . ."

"Don't argue with me." Carlos dropped his voice. "Do as I say, and I won't tell anyone who fired the first shot." Marie turned red, looked away. "Just leave us with food and another pack for him. Or do you have one aboard, Chris?"

"It's in the skimmer. Of course, we could use another gun, just in case we run into any boids. . . ."

"The boids are wintering south of here. You know that." Carlos turned toward the Thompson brothers. "One more thing. Dr. Constanza is your responsibility. When I get back, I expect to find him in good health. If he has any accidents on the way back . . ."

"That's not going to happen. Count on it." Barry gave Lars and Garth a dark look. "Are you sure you want to. . . ?"

"I know what I'm doing." Kneeling next to the camp stove, Carlos snuffed it out, then began to fold it. "Lars, Marie, load the SIMS and bring it with you. Barry, help Dr. Constanza aboard. Garth, pack some snow on top of those graves. I want this place to look just the way we found it."

As the others went about their tasks, Carlos shoved the collapsed stove into his backpack, then dug some rations out of the mess kit. "They follow orders well, don't they?" Chris murmured with just a trace of sarcasm.

"Sometimes." From the corner of his eye, he saw the entrenchment tool Marie had dropped. It lay on the ground just a couple of feet away. For the moment, no one was paying any attention to them. Chris could easily snatch it up, bash him over the head. If he was lucky, he could then grab his rifle, shoot everyone while their backs were still turned. "When we're out here on our own," he added, "we learn to count on each other to stay alive. Know what I mean?"

Chris reached down, picked up the shovel. Carlos swiveled on his hips, watched as he folded the blade, collapsed the handle, and held it out to him. "Yeah, I know," Chris said quietly. "The only thing I don't get is why you're doing this."

"Haven't seen you in a long time." Carlos took the entrenchment tool from him, shoved it into a loop on the side of his pack. "Think it's time we had a talk."

Gabriel 75 / 1422—Fort Lopez, Hammerhead

Like an immense swoop descending upon its nest, the heavy-lifter came in for touchdown, its VTOL jets blasting snow away from the ring of flashing red beacons that marked the landing field. The ground crew watched as the spacecraft settled upon its tricycle landing gear; they waited until the engines cut off, then trotted over to the aft cargo hatch, while an honor guard of six soldiers took up position on either side of the forward crew hatch. As the hatch swung open and the gangway ramp lowered, an officer standing nearby shouted a command. The soldiers came to attention, swinging their rifles upon their left shoulders and snapping their boot heels together.

It wasn't the reception Captain Baptiste had anticipated; in fact, he was quietly appalled. But he said nothing as Matriarch Hernandez led the way down the ramp, Savant Hull bringing up the rear. She pointedly ignored the honor guard as she walked past them, pulling up the cowl of her cloak. "Many apologies for not giving you a proper welcome," she murmured once they were past the soldiers. "It's the best we can do under the circumstances."

"Think nothing of it." And indeed, the absence of whatever the matriarch considered "a proper welcome"—a military parade, perhaps, with full colors—was the least of his concerns. A cold wind whipped across the plateau, stinging his face and causing him to shiver despite the thick parka he wore. He felt lightheaded—the lower atmospheric pressure, of course; he had been warned about this—but when he took a deep breath, the frigid air caused his teeth to chatter. He pulled down the bill of his cap before the wind could snatch it away. All things considered, he reflected, he would have preferred New Florida; even the name sounded warmer.

By now, the officer in charge of the honor guard had dismissed his troops and had come over to join them. "Captain, Savant Hull, may I present First Lieutenant Bon Cortez," Hernandez said. "Lieutenant, Captain Fernando Baptiste, commanding officer of the *Spirit of Social Collectivism Carried to the Stars*."

"A pleasure to meet you, sir." Cortez clasped a gloved fist against his chest. "Welcome to Fort Lopez."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Cortez was younger than Baptiste would have expected from someone in charge of a military installation; no more than twenty-five Earth years, his beard was probably the first one he'd ever grown. "I hope you've been able to keep warm," he added, at a loss for anything else to say.

Cortez smiled, relaxed just a little. "We're keeping busy, Captain. It helps a little. If you'll follow me, please, I'll show you around." As they walked away from the HLLV, two platoons of Guard infantry were marching down the ramp; Baptiste could hear the shouted commands of their squad leaders as they fell into formation next to the craft. They stamped their feet against the hard ground and hunched their shoulders against the brutal wind. Only Gregor Hull was impervious to the cold; for once, he felt envious of the savant for his lack of mortal concerns.

"We've only been here for the last eight weeks," Cortez was saying, "just after the beginning of the month, so you'll have to pardon our lack of facilities. There hasn't been time to build permanent structures." He was speaking of the semi-rigid inflatable domes, each a half-acre in diameter, near the landing field. "The forest is about a half-mile away, and we've begun marking trees for when we get around to . . ."

"We felt it more important to establish a base of operations as quickly as possible," the matriarch interrupted. "I picked the lieutenant for this job because he was instrumental in selecting the site for the bridge we constructed across the East Channel. So far, he's done a commendable job."

Baptiste noted the expression on Cortez's face; he seemed to be chewing his lower lip. "Thank you, ma'am," he said, his voice tight. "I'm glad you approve." Then he pointed to the edge of the plateau. "If you'll come this way, I'll show you why Fort Lopez is here."

"I was wondering about that," Baptiste said. "After all, if you already have a large force on New Florida, then why put a base west of Midland?"

"New Florida has been compromised, sir. Rigil Kent can sneak across the East Channel anytime they want. They've already hit the Liberty twice, not to mention the job they did on the Garcia Narrows Bridge. . . ." Behind them, Luisa Hernandez cleared her throat. "The Matriarch Hernandez Bridge, I mean . . ."

"We had to look elsewhere for a military base," the matriarch said, "and Hammerhead was the most likely place." She extended a hand from beneath her cloak. "As you can see, here we enjoy a certain geographic advantage."

They had reached the edge of the plateau. Below them, a sheer granite escarpment fell away; three hundred feet down, waves crashed against jagged rocks. Fort Lopez overlooked the confluence of the Midland Channel and Short River; in the distance to the south lay Barren Isle, barely visible as a small dun-colored island. To the east, they could see the shores of Midland, with Mt. Bonestell on the far horizon. As a military surveyor, Lt. Cortez had done his job well; the cliff offered a natural defense against anyone who might try to cross the channel, and the island itself was a perfect place for staging military operations.

"A good choice." Baptiste admired the view. This would be a great place to build a house, were he to decide to remain on Coyote. That wasn't his intent, yet it was tempting nonetheless. "But I still don't understand why it's so important to expend so much effort on capturing a handful of malcontents."

The wind ruffled the edge of the matriarch's cowl; she pulled it back from her face. "I thought I'd made this clear already," she said, her voice low. "Perhaps I haven't. They've attacked us again and again ever since we arrived. They've stolen firearms, destroyed spacecraft, sabotaged a bridge, ambushed soldiers, and assassinated the Lieutenant Governor. . . ."

"You have no proof that Savant Castro is dead." Until now, Gregor Hull had been silent. "I tend to believe that he may still be alive."

"I have no proof that he is." Luisa Hernandez shook her head. "With all due respect, Savant, you and Captain Baptiste only recently arrived. We've been dealing with this situation for just over nine Earth years.

What was once a local disturbance has become a major uprising. Left unchecked, it will metasize into a full-scale revolution. Rigil Kent . . . that is, Carlos Montero and his followers . . . have made it their mission to chase the Western Hemisphere Union off Coyote. You know as well as I that that isn't an option. . . ."

"We're aware of that, Matriarch." Baptiste paused. A gyro was lifting off from the landing pad, its rotors clattering as it rose above the shuttles parked near the HLLV. He waited until the noise abated, then went on. "Have you tried to talk with the original colonists? Open a dialogue with their leaders?"

"I met with Robert Lee shortly after we arrived." She lifted her chin, almost as if daring him to challenge her. "In fact, he led a small group to the *Glorious Destiny* . . . it was his idea to negotiate, not mine. I attempted to reach an amicable understanding, but he refused, and instead abandoned the Liberty colony and fled to Midland. Since then, their actions have been nothing but hostile."

"Which makes me wonder what you may have said that would have caused them to . . ."

"Captain, I refuse to stand here and listen to someone second-guess what was done nine years ago. As the colonial governor, my duty is to maintain a Union presence on this world. Your duty is to back me up, by force if necessary. I say that it's necessary."

"I only wish to . . ."

"Point out the alternatives, yes. Your objections are noted." The matriarch turned away. "Come with me now. We have work to do."

Baptiste watched as Hernandez began striding back toward camp, Savant Hull following her. He let out breath, looked out over the channel. Cortez remained with him; at first the younger man said nothing, then he stepped closer. "You have to forgive her, sir," he said quietly, his voice almost lost in the wind. "Ever since Savant Castro disappeared, she's been . . . well, obsessed . . . with tracking down Rigil Kent."

"So I see. . . ." And to this end, she'd laid a trap, in hopes that Montero would take the bait. "And how do you feel about this? Do you think that she may have exceeded her authority?"

Cortez stiffened, his eyes raising to meet his own. "I lost several friends at Thompson's Ferry, " he replied. "Please, sir, don't speak to me of excessive authority. I owe Rigil Kent."

Then he walked away, leaving Baptiste by himself. Feeling cold, and in a trap of his own.

Gabriel 75 / 1917—Mt. Aldrich

"This is as good a place as any." Carlos gently pulled the reins, lifting the shag's heavy head and bringing the beast to a halt. He shifted sideways upon his blanket saddle, looked back at Chris. "Need a hand there?"

"No, I . . . how do you. . . ?" Chris yanked too hard; his shag bellowed in protest, and once again attempted to shake its rider off its hairy back.

This time, it nearly succeeded; thrown off balance, Chris stayed on only by grabbing two fistfuls of matted fur. The shag grunted and shook itself again like a enormous dog coming out of the water. Then, resigning itself to rude treatment, it obediently kneeled on its elephant-like legs, giving Chris a chance to slip his feet over the side.

"A little better." Carlos suppressed a grin as the shag farted loudly. Chris staggered away from the animal, holding his nose as he massaged his aching backside. "You'll get the hang of it after awhile. Once they get used to you, you hardly have to . . ."

"Yeah, yeah. Sure." Chris regarded the shags with disgust. They resembled water buffalos with dreadlocks, save for elongated snouts with upward-curved tusks like those of a wild boar. Despite their ferocious appearance, though, the herbivorous creatures were as docile as cows, and easily trained as pack animals. "I would rather have walked."

"We'll be doing that soon enough." Climbing down from its back, Carlos took his shag's reins and, coaxing it with a click of his tongue, led it to the nearest faux-birch. Once it was tied up, the beast raised its snout, peeled a strip of bark off the tree, and began munching upon it. After removing their blankets and bags, Marie and the Thompson brothers had left behind the three shags had ridden. The shags had an unerring sense of direction, so Carlos knew they'd make their way back to their point of origin. "They don't like having riders when they're going downhill," Carlos went on as he pulled off the saddlebags, "so we'll have to lead them once we head down the mountain."

Following Carlos's example, Chris gingerly approached his own shag, took it by the reins and tugged it over to another tree. They had spent the better part of the day climbing Mt. Aldrich, following a game trail that led around the eastern slope of the mountain. Now they were on top of a ridge about a few hundred feet below the summit. Through the trees, they could make out the other side of the valley; Uma was setting behind Mt. Shaw, with Coyote's sister worlds Raven and Fox beginning to glimmer in the dark purple sky.

Chris stood off to the side, watching Carlos as he pulled a tent from one of the saddle bags and began to unroll it on the snow-covered ground. "You can help by gathering some wood," Carlos said. "The stuff on top is wet, but if you dig under it, you can find . . ."

"I know how to find firewood." Chris eyed the rifle that Carlos pulled off his shoulder and leaned against a boulder. "You're awfully trusting, you know that?"

Carlos shrugged as he assembled the tent poles. "What would you do? You have no idea where you are. Without me, you'd be lost." He glanced up at the sky. "Better hurry. It's going to be dark soon."

Chris hesitated, then turned and walked away. By the time Carlos had finished erecting the dome tent and had unpacked the camp stove, Chris reappeared with an armload of dry branches. Carlos watched as Chris kicked aside the snow, built a miniature tepee of twigs, then used a pocket lighter to set fire to some leaves he'd tucked beneath the kindling. Within minutes, a small fire was burning, bringing a little patch of warmth back to the world just as the last light of day was fading.

They ate in silence, dining on reheated rations. As night set in, Bear began to rise to the east; it was a clear night, and soon the stars began to come out. Carlos left Chris with the cleanup; while he was scrubbing the plates and pan with water he boiled on the stove, Carlos walked over to the tent and produced a small catskin flask from one of the saddlebags.

Chris raised an eye as Carlos uncapped the flask. "What is that stuff?"

"Bearshine." Carlos took a sip, winced, and offered the flask to him. "You remember Lew Geary, don't you? This is his stuff . . . good old-fashioned corn liquor. Try some, it's good."

"I'll pass, thanks. Stopped drinking."

"Sorry. Didn't know." Recognizing his *faux pas,* he capped the flask, then sat down on the saddle blanket he spread out next to the fire. "Glad to hear it. You were in pretty sad shape there for awhile."

"Yeah, well . . ." Chris picked up a branch, absently stirred the coals. "Nothing like a little family tragedy to turn you into the town drunk."

Carlos hesitated. The memories of their last days together in Liberty were still sharp. "If you want me to apologize for David again. . . ."

"I'm over that." Chris shook his head. "It wasn't your fault. David brought it on himself. He did something stupid, and . . . well, he's dead, and that's it." He was quiet for a moment. "And I'm not going to blame you for Wendy, either. She had a choice between you and me, and she picked you. How is she, anyway?"

"Wendy's fine." Carlos fed another piece of wood into the fire. "Susan's growing up fast, going to school, all that. We've got a dozen or so kids in Defiance now, so she and Kuniko have their hands full, taking care of them."

"Good." Another pause. "And my mother?"

"Doing much better, now that she's . . ." Carlos stopped, reluctant to say more.

"Now that she's away from Shuttlefield?" Chris looked up from the fire. "Go ahead, say it. 'Your mother's great, now that she doesn't have you around. . . .'"

"You know that wasn't what I was going to say." Carlos felt his temper rise. "Why are you making this hard? I'm trying to . . ."

"Make friends again?" Chris remained irritatingly calm. "Was that your idea? Take me up in the woods, have a little cookout, slip me some booze. Pretty soon I'll soften up and let bygones be bygones? C'mon, old buddy. . . ."

"Stop calling me that."

"Why not? Old buddy, old friend, old pal . . . best friend from childhood, all that" Chris smirked. "You know, even our names are alike. I was born just a couple of months before you, our dads were friends, so your father picked another name that began with a 'C.' Chris and Carlos, Carlos and Chris. The folks thought it was cute. . . ."

"Stop it."

"And then you abandoned me. When the Union showed up, you locked my mother and me in a cabin while everyone else made a clean getaway. You know how hard that was, knowing that we were dirt so far as . . .?"

"You transmitted a message to their ship, telling them where we were located." Carlos glared at him. "If anyone's guilty of betrayal, it's you, not me. And then you joined up with them, became their Chief Proctor. . . ."

"Like I had a choice? You guys weren't going to take us back. What else was I supposed to do? Live in the squatter camp along with all those poor bastards they'd conned into leaving Earth so that they'd have a source of cheap labor?"

"If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Is that it?" Carlos shook his head. "They're going to ruin this place. Every few months, another ship arrives, bringing another thousand people. . . ."

"Gosh, really?" Chris rolled his eyes in mock surprise. "Why, if a thousand more ships arrive over the next . . . oh, say, a hundred years . . . then we'll have a million people on this planet. Why, we might even have a population explosion!"

"Given our limited resources . . ."

"Oh, c'mon," Chris chuckled as he looked at him askance. "We've barely explored one-eighth of this planet. Even if the Union emptied all the cities and sent everyone here, we'd still have miles of elbow room."

"Is that what you want? To have this place become just like Earth, complete with its own dictatorship?" Feeling the darkness encroaching upon them, Carlos stood up, walked over to where he'd left his rifle. He brought it back to the camp fire, laid it down next to him. "That's why we came here in the first place, to get away from all that. So far as I'm concerned, the Union is no better than the Republic."

"And you really think you're going to get them to pack up and go home? Dream on." Chris gestured toward the rifle. "Why'd you do that? You said yourself that I'm not going anywhere."

Carlos didn't reply. He unstopped the flask, took a sip of bearshine; it burned its way down his throat, making a warm place inside his stomach. He was surprised when Chris reached out his hand. "I thought you said you'd stopped drinking."

"It's cold. Unless you've got some hot chocolate stashed away. . . ."

"Haven't had hot chocolate since we left Earth. Be my guest." Chris accepted the flask from him, upended it and took a slug. He gagged, coughed into his fist. "Sorry," Carlos murmured, "Should have warned you . . . it's powerful stuff."

"God!" Chris gasped, pounded his chest with his fist. "Now I remember why I don't drink anymore." Tears seeped from the corners of his eyes as he thrust the flask back toward him. "So . . . why'd you get your gun? Worried I might run away?"

For a second, Carlos was tempted to tell him the truth. For better or worse, they were talking to one another for the first time in two Coyote years. Yet Carlos still couldn't trust him, and they had another day of travel before they reached Defiance. If they made it as far as Johnson Falls . . . "Up here at night, sometimes you hear things." He pulled the rifle a little closer. "I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"What things?" Chris unbuttoned the canteen from his belt and drank some water. "The boids stay in the lowlands and the creek cats are in hibernation. What's going to bother you up here this time of year?"

"Remember Zoltan Shirow? The First Church of Universal Transformation?"

"The freak with the bat wings?" Chris laughed. "Oh, boy, do I know him.

I heard he brought his people over here from Thompson's Ferry early last year. Good riddance . . . whatever happened to him, anyway?"

"They tried to hike over Mt. Shaw, but they got caught in a nor'wester. Almost everyone died up there except their guide. Ben Harlan. You might know him. . . ?" Chris shook his head. "Anyway, Ben managed to make it down the mountain. When we found him, he said that they'd killed each other. When the food ran out, they went cannibal. . . ."

Chris whistled beneath his breath. "No joke."

"No joke. After the snow melted, Ben and some other guys hiked back up, found the place where he'd last seen them. From what I hear, it was pretty gross. But when they counted the bodies, they came up two short . . . and it's hard to miss someone with wings and fangs."

"So what are you saying?" Chris peered at him from across the fire. "Zoltan's still running around up here?"

Carlos was tempted to uncork the flask again. He reconsidered and left it alone. "We've had patrols in these mountains for the last year. That's how we found you guys. Every now and then, they've come back, saying that they've seen things, heard things. . . ."

"Oh, get off it. I'm too old for ghost stories." Chris stood up, arched his back. "Go ahead, keep your gun handy if you want. I'm going to get some shut-eye." He shambled over to where he'd left his pack, hauled it over to the tent. "Tell me if you see Zoltan. Maybe he'd like some of that rot-gut you carry around."

"I'll do that." Carlos watched as Chris crawled into the tent, shoving his pack before him. He waited while he heard him unroll his sleeping bag, then he put aside the rifle and picked up the flask once again.

He dropped another piece of wood into the fire. Sparks flickered upward into the bare branches, melded with the stars in the black sky. He was about to look down again when he spotted a single point of light, slowly moving east to west across the night.

The latest Union starship. Watching it, he felt a twinge of unease, as if someone up there was spying upon him. An irrational thought. He took a last swig of bearshine, then stood up and headed for the tent.

One more day on the trail, and then he'd be home again. He missed Wendy and Susan. He hoped that the rest of the journey would be uneventful.

Gabriel 75 / 2302—Fort Lopez

"Captain Baptiste?" The warrant officer standing near the map wall cupped a hand against her earpiece. "Receiving orbital telemetry from the *Spirit*. They report tracking two clear signals from the ground."

"Thank you, Acosta. Put it up, please." Baptiste stood up from the chair in which he had been dozing for the last half-hour, walked across the dimly lit situation room to join her. He needed to go to bed; it had been a long day, and the only thing keeping him awake was coffee. But he had been waiting all evening for his ship to fly over Midland; now that it was in po-

sition, they should be able to get a fix upon the extra-low-frequency signals coming from the ground.

Giselle Acosta tapped a few keys, and a holograph formed within the map wall: a topo map of Midland, its mountains and valleys depicted as contour lines. As Baptiste watched, two illuminated crosshatches appeared upon the southeastern corner of the island, so close together that they almost merged.

"Enlarge this area," he said, pointing to the markers. Someone came up behind him; looking around, he saw Lt. Cortez. "Didn't know you were still here," Baptiste murmured. "Are you off-duty?"

"Thought you might need me, sir." Cortez watched as the image expanded, becoming a broad valley surrounded on three sides by mountains. "That's the southern end of the Gillis Range . . . Mt. Shaw up here, and Mt. Aldrich down there." He pointed to a sinuous line weaving through the center of the valley. "This river comes down between them and empties into the Great Equatorial about a hundred miles to the south."

Baptiste nodded. The two markers were farther apart now: one on the river almost midway between the two mountains, the other near the top of Mt. Aldrich. "They've separated," he said, then he turned to call across the room. "Any further contact from the patrol?"

"No, sir." A corporal seated at the com station swiveled in his chair to look at him. "Last report was at oh-eight-thirty this morning."

"Looks like we may have lost someone." Cortez frowned. "But the other two signals are still active. Should I wake the matriarch?"

Baptiste shook his head. If they got Luisa Hernandez out of bed, she'd only demand immediate action. A night sortie in unknown terrain was an invitation to disaster; their target wasn't likely to go anywhere before morning. "Let her sleep," he replied, then patted Acosta's shoulder. "Good work. Get a lock on those coordinates, and tell your relief to keep an eye on them when *Spirit* makes its next flyover in about six hours."

Acosta typed another command into her keyboard, and a translucent grid appeared above the map, displaying latitude and longitude lines. Baptiste yawned, then he looked at Cortez once more. "Get a few hours of shut-eye, then muster two Diablo recon teams at oh-five hundred."

'Diablos?" Cortez raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure we're going to need them, sir?"

"Rigil Kent's been pretty good at taking down light infantry. Let's see how they handle heavy stuff." Baptiste raised a hand to stifle another yawn as he walked away. "Four Diablos on the flight line for liftoff at six. Tomorrow we go hunting."

Zamael, Gabriel 76 / 0753 —Mt. Aldrich

"From here on, we walk the rest of the way." Carlos hopped down from his shag into the snow. "You can leave your pack," he added as he withdrew his carbine from its scabbard and pulled its strap over his shoulder. "They'll carry that . . . just not you."

Chris carefully climbed down from his mount. His shag had come to a stop on its own, and now it waited patiently for him to take the reins in hand. Ever since they had resumed their journey just after sunrise, the trail had gradually led down a gentle incline, taking them off the ridge where they had spent the night until they had come to the top of a sixty-foot granite bluff. Below them, the Pioneer Valley narrowed, becoming a deep and heavily wooded canyon. On the other side, only a few miles away, they could see see the lower slopes of Mt. Shaw; Goat Kill Creek lay several hundred feet below, invisible save for a slender line that meandered across the valley floor.

"Watch your step. It gets pretty steep after this." Clucking his tongue, Carlos led his shag toward a break in the trees where the trail began to descend into the canyon. He stopped to pick up a fallen branch; breaking it over a boulder, he tossed the other half to Chris. "Here, use this. Might make it a little easier."

"Thanks." They'd spoken little this morning; too much had been said the previous evening, and neither of them felt like talking. "Y'know, I'm just curious . . . why do you call this Goat Kill Creek?"

"First spring after we moved here, we let the goats graze near it." Keeping his eyes on where he put his feet, Carlos was paying more attention to the trail than to what he was saying. "We didn't know that it floods after the snow melts. Lost a few that way. The name stuck."

"Makes sense." Chris felt the soles of his boots slide upon loose gravel beneath the snow; he used the stick to balance himself. "So I guess we're not far from Defiance."

Carlos suddenly realized that he'd revealed more than he should. "Not that far," he said noncommittally. "Maybe a few . . . "

He stopped. From somewhere not far away, a new sound drew his attention. At first, he thought it was trees rattling in the wind, yet it had a different quality: artificial, more repetitive. Carlos peered at the overcast sky through the snow-laden branches, trying to figure out where it was coming from.

"What?" Chris asked. "You think you. . . ?"

"Hush." Carlos held up a hand. Now the sound was louder. It also sounded like . . .

A gyro suddenly roared overhead, passing only a few hundred feet above them. It swept over the top of Mt. Aldrich, the noise of its rotors clattering against rock and timber, shaking snow off the treetops. The shags brayed in terror; Carlos grabbed his beast's reins and fought to keep it under control as the gyro skimmed out over the valley.

What the hell? Where did that. . . ?

And it wasn't alone. Now he could see another gyro, cruising at low altitude up the valley several miles away. As the first aircraft banked to the left, making a sharp turn that brought it back toward them, the second slowed to a near-stop, its twin nacelles canting upward into vertical position. Like a giant dragonfly, the second gyro slowly descended into the canyon, gliding back and forth as if searching for a place to touch down.

"Duck!" he yelled, but it was much too late for that. The first gyro hurtled toward them once more, this time even closer. Carlos couldn't re-

strain his shag any longer; in blind panic, the beast tore loose from its reins, then turned and galloped back uphill. For an instant it seemed as if the shag would trample Chris, but he let go of his own shag and threw himself out out of the way. The animals nearly collided with one another as they charged up the trail.

"They're getting away!" Chris scrambled on hands and knees in an absurd attempt to grab his shag's reins. "They've got our. . . !"

"Let 'em go!" Carlos grabbed him by the back of his jacket, hauled him beneath the nearest tree. But Chris was right; all their gear—including, he realized, his radio, along with extra cartridges for his rifle—were in packs and saddlebags lashed to the shags. Given time, they might be able to chase them down. But they were out of time, and the gyro was closing in.

It was at treetop level now, its propwash causing twigs and clumps of wet snow to rain down upon them; the noise of its rotors was deafening. Raising a hand to shield his face, he caught a glimpse of its undercarriage. The craft was hovering directly above them, its nacelles rotated into landing position. In another few seconds, it would come down and . . .

Yet it seemed to hesitate in midair. A couple of seconds passed, then the gyro veered away. Coughing against the snow flurry, Carlos watched the aircraft as it retreated. Gaining altitude, it glided toward the summit, searching for . . .

Of course. There was no way it could touch down here. The mountainside was much too steep, with too many trees in the way; the pilot would have to find a level spot near the top of the mountain. He and Chris had passed several clearings where the gyro could safely land. Once the pilot located one of them, he could drop into it. And Carlos had little doubt that a squad of Union Guard soldiers would be aboard the gyro.

"C'mon. We're going." Carlos pulled Chris to his feet. For a second, it seemed as if Chris was about to resist. Carlos shoved him in the back, propelling him down the steep trail.

Their boot heels dug into snow as they half-ran, half-fell down the rocky slope, grabbing at saplings for support. Within minutes, Carlos lost sight of the trail. Desperately trying to spot it again, he slipped, fell back onto his butt; swearing beneath his fogged breath, he stumbled to his feet. Chris was already a dozen yards ahead of him; as much as they needed to put distance between themselves and the ridge, Carlos couldn't afford to loose him now. He'd had suspicions before; now their survival depended upon his instincts being correct.

Carlos charged downhill until he reached the base of the bluff. A massive stone wall rose above him, shelves of granite slate forming an overhang that loomed over his head; piles of broken talus lay at the bottom of the bluffs, where erosion had caused the bluffs to gradually disintergrate, forming ancient landslides. From far away, he could hear a low, steady rumble, like distant drums. The trail might be gone, but Johnson Falls was only a half-mile away.

Chris was struggling across the talus when Carlos caught up with him. Grabbing his shoulder, Carlos turned him around, slammed him against the cold rock wall.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

"Where's what? I don't know what you're . . ."

"They didn't find us by accident." Carlos yanked the rifle off his shoulder. "You're wearing some sort of tracking device. Hand it over."

Chris's mouth trembled. "Man, you're paranoid. There's no . . ."

"I'm not kidding." With a flick of his thumb, Carlos disengaged the safety. He backed up a step, rested the stock against his armpit, and raised the muzzle so that it was aimed straight at Chris's chest. "So help me, I'll kill you if you don't show me where it is. And I won't count to three."

Chris stared back at him, not quite believing what he'd heard. Carlos's forefinger moved within the trigger guard, and that was all it took. "All right, all right!" Chris tore off his jacket, turned around. "It's there!"

A small plastic unit was hooked to the back of his belt. "Take it off," Carlos said, and watched as Chris fumbled at the buckle. "Who else were carrying these things?"

"We all were." His belt now unfastened, Chris reached back to pull it off from behind. "If you'd checked the guys you shot, you would have found theirs. But you buried them. . . ."

"Leaving just you and Constanza. And we separated you." Carlos took the belt from him, gave the unit a quick examination. An ELF transponder of some sort, its signal capable of being received from orbit. Probably by the Union starship he'd spotted last night. He yanked the unit off the belt, dropped it on the ground, and stamped on it a couple of times until it made a satisfying crunch beneath his the sole of his foot. "I figured that this was some sort of set-up. Finding you out here was too convenient."

"Damn, you're swift." Chris's smile was fatuous, the smug look of someone who'd played a good game and figured that he held the winning hand. "They're looking for you, genius. The famous Rigil Kent. And now they've got you where they . . ."

The distant sound of rotors interrupted him. Looking around, Carlos spotted the second gyro lifting off from farther down the canyon; it looked as if it had touched down somewhere on the river, at least three or four miles away. He couldn't see or hear the gyro that had been tracking him and Chris, but he had little doubt that it had managed to find someplace to land farther up the mountain.

One squad coming at them from above, another from below. The team in the canyon would be homing in on Constanza's transponder, though, and he'd just destroyed Chris's. He had something of a head start, though. So long as Marie and her guys weren't still . . .

"So what now?" Chris was almost casual about this. "Leave me? Shoot me? Better make up your mind. I think you're going to have company soon."

"That way." Carlos gestured in the direction of Johnson Falls. "You're coming with me."

"Sure. Why not?" Chris gave a nonchalant shrug. "Sort of figured you'd say that." He turned, then stopped to glance back over his shoulder. "In fact, so did she."

"What's that?" Carlos didn't have to ask who he was talking about. "What did she say?"

"That you'd never kill me." Again, the self-assured smile. "To tell the truth, though, that's not why I told her I'd go along on this. I just wanted to be there when they bring you down."

"Sorry to disappoint you. I'm not dying today." Carlos pointed in the direction of the falls. "Now march."

Gabriel 76 / 0837—Fort Lopez

"Flight One reports Diablo Alpha is on the ground." The master sergeant seated at the carrel closest to Baptiste didn't look away from his wraparound console. "They've lost the transponder, but they've had visual contact with primary target. Closing in to intercept."

"Diablo Bravo reporting in, sir." Acosta, seated at the adjacent carrel, glanced back at him. "They have a clear fix on secondary target. It appears immobile. Moving to investigate."

"Thank you." Baptiste continued to study the map wall. Two red markers on a ridgeline below the summit of Mt. Aldrich indicated the position of Diablo Alpha. As Sgt. Cartman had just said, the crosshatch indicating the location of the EMF beacon worn by Chief Proctor Levin had disappeared shortly after he had been spotted by Flight One. The transponder worn by Enrique Constanza, though, was still active; it hadn't changed position since it had been acquired by the *Spirit* last night, though, and this worried him.

He walked over to the Diablo Alpha carrel. "Tell them to proceed with caution," he said quietly. "This could be a trick of some sort."

"What makes you think that, Captain?" Luisa Hernandez came up from behind him, her cloak brushing softly against the cement floor. The situation room was crowded now, filled with Union officers monitoring the operation. "For all we know, that might be the location of the *Alabama* party."

She had a point. Constanza's signal was coming from a point a considerable distance from the last known whereabouts of the advance team. The loss of contact with its other four members tended to support the theory that it had been ambushed by Rigil Kent nearly fifty miles down river; it had to be assumed that they were now dead, their transponders buried along with their bodies. If Constanza had been taken prisoner, then his captors may have brought him to a site somewhere upstream . . . perhaps even their ultimate objective, the *Alabama* party's hideaway.

Baptiste absently rubbed his chin as he watched the images being transmitted from Bravo Leader. One of the screens displayed a shot from the camera mounted on the Diablo's chest: fuzzy and monochromatic, lurching a bit with each heavy step that the team leader took, it showed a riverbank overgrown with dense brush, the river itself a silver surface reflecting the morning sun.

"Too easy," he murmured, not so much to the matriarch as to himself.

"What did you say?" She stood next to him, her arms folded across her chest. "You think this is easy? Captain, this operation has been months in the planning. I assure you, we have the ability to . . ."

"And from what you've told me," he said quietly, "you've consistently underestimated them. You seem to believe that, simply because you have more men and more equipment, your adversary is lacking in resources. That's a mistake."

Her hands fell to her sides, and she glared at him with something close to contempt. Although he hadn't raised his voice, Baptiste was conscious of the fact that the room had gone quiet; all around them, officers were listening to this exchange. He wondered how many had felt the same way themselves, but had been unwilling to challenge the authority of the colonial governor.

Hernandez stepped back, her eyes narrowing. "Perhaps you're correct, Captain. We should change the purpose of this operation." She turned away, walked over to the Diablo Alpha carrel. "Where are your men now?"

"Descending the ridge, ma'am." Cartman pointed to a screen depicting the location of Diablo Alpha, a pair of asterisks slowly making their way down a close-set pattern of contour lines. Its chest camera displayed a blurred image of tree and snow-covered boulders. "They haven't made visual contact yet, but sonic patterns indicate movement about five hundred yards ahead. . . ."

"Show me the shot Flight One caught of them," she demanded. Cartman worked his keyboard, and another screen lit to depict a jolting overhead image: two men, captured for a few brief seconds by a gyro's belly-camera, peering up at them from beneath snow-covered branches. "Freeze!" She pointed to the man on the right: young, bearded, a Union carbine slung over his shoulder. "Take a good look, Captain . . . Carlos Montero, Rigil Kent himself. Tell me, do you think this is a person you'd underestimate?"

"No, ma'am, I wouldn't." It wasn't fear that Baptiste saw in Montero's face, but something else . . . a determination that, under other circumstances, Baptiste would admire.

"Neither do I. And I've been dealing with him for much longer than you have." Hernandez prodded her lower jaw. "Patch me into Alpha and Bravo," she told Cartman. "I wish to speak with them directly."

"Matriarch," Baptiste said, "may I remind you that this is a Union Guard operation. . . ."

"And may I remind you that I'm colonial governor." She deliberately turned her back on him. Cartman looked up and nodded, indicating that she was now being heard by the two strike teams. "Diablo Alpha, Diablo Bravo, this is the Matriarch Luisa Herandez. The mission objective has now changed. Your first priority is termination, not capture. Repeat . . . termination is now the primary objective. That is all." She prodded her jaw again, then looked at Baptiste once more. "I think that should convince you how seriously I regard this."

Baptiste regarded her with horror that he hoped his face wouldn't betray. This wasn't what he'd been led to believe they were doing. "I never doubted it," he said, carefully choosing his words. "You realize that your orders include the termination of two civilians . . . including your chief proctor."

Her face went pale, as if she suddenly realized what she'd done. There

was always time to rescind the order, or at least change it. But then the coldness returned.

"Of course I know that," she said. "Just do as I say."

She walked away, and it was in that moment that Baptiste realized just how far her obsession with Rigil Kent had gone.

Gabriel 76 / 0846—Pioneer Valley

At first, the binoculars revealed nothing save for the swaying of tree limbs in the wind. Then a shadow passed across the bottom of the bluffs, flitting across the rock slide. Almost as soon as Carlos spotted it, though, it seemed to vanish; as he continued to watch, he caught a brief glimpse of snow falling off a clingberry bush, as if knocked down by a specter following the tracks he and Chris had left behind.

"Having trouble?" Chris lay against the boulder next to him, a smirk upon his face. "I imagine they're hard to spot in ghost mode."

"And I bet you're not going to tell me what that is, are you?" Carlos kept his eyes on the bluffs, hoping to spot any further movement. Yes, there it was again . . . but now there appeared to be two shadows, one just behind the other.

"Umm . . ." Chris thought about it a moment. "Okay, let me give you a hint. You're looking at them all the wrong way."

Carlos considered what he'd just said, then laid down the binoculars and picked up his rifle. Peering through the scope, he switched to infrared. Everything went dark, as if twilight had settled upon the forest, but now he could make out two hulking silhouttes, ill-defined yet vaguely man-shaped, resembling eggs with short legs and oversized arms.

"There you go." Chris chuckled. "That's their weak point. Their suits are coated with some sort of polymer that lets them camouflage themselves, but they've never been able to mask the heat from their power systems. Go IR, and on a cold day like this, you can see 'em . . . sort of."

"You seem to know an awful lot about these things." Carlos studied the two figures slowly making their way along the bottom of the cliff. He had led Chris to a large, tooth-shaped outcropping about a hundred yards downhill from the bluff. For a few minutes, they were safe. Just enough time for him to take stock of their pursuers. "What did you call them? Diablos?"

"Diablo Mark III combat armor, uh-huh. Tactical assault gear. Some friends in the Guard told me all about them, but I've never seen one until now. Wanna let me take a look?"

Carlos ignored him as he squinted through the scope, lining up the two figures within his crosshairs. He had a clear line of fire, if he cared to take it. If this was heavy armor, though, then it was probably impervious to small-arms fire; shooting now would only expose his position. "Anything else you'd care to tell me?"

"Well . . . if this is a standard hunter-killer team, then it means that the leader is probably sweeping this entire area with his sensor array. So if

you think they don't know where we are, you're wrong. They're probably listening to us right now . . . if they haven't picked up the infrared beam from your scope."

Carlos felt his blood freeze. At that moment, the Diablo in front turned toward him. A cylindrical shape mounted on its right shoulder swiveled his way, as if taking aim directly at him. He ducked, pulling his rifle against his chest; an instant later, there was a faint hiss as hot flecks of superheated granite stung the right side of his face.

"Oh yeah . . . and they're armed with particle-beam lasers, too!" Chris laughed out loud. "Oh man, you are so screwed. . . !"

Carlos wiped a hand across his forehead and cheek; his glove came away with blood from a half-dozen scratches. He cast a baleful look at Chris as he slid down the boulder. If they were fast enough, they might be able to get the rest of the way down the hillside before . . .

"Hey! Down here! You guys, down here!"

Carlos looked around. While his back was turned, Chris had scampered past him up the outcropping. Now he stood on top of the boulder, waving his arms above his head.

"I got him!" Chris yelled again, then whistled sharply and pointed toward him. "C'mon, he's here."

A dozen memories flashed through Carlos's mind as he brought up his rifle, leveled it at Chris's back. He tried not to think about all the things they'd done together when they were kids as his finger curled within the trigger guard. He took a deep breath, prayed that God would forgive him. . . .

There was a soft fizzing sound, like a white-hot rod being shoved into a pound of meat; for a half-second, Carlos glimpsed a slight distortion in the air. Then Chris screamed and fell back from the boulder, clutching at his left shoulder just above the biceps. Carlos scrambled up the outcropping, grabbed Chris and hauled him down next to him. He pulled aside his hand, looked closely: a blackened hole in his jacket, about a quarter-inch in diameter. The laser had lanced through his shoulder, cauterizing the flesh and leaving a entrance wound that smelled like burned pork. Apparently the Diablo team wasn't being too particular about their targets. . . .

"Son of a bitch shot me!" Chris winced as he clasped a hand across his shoulder. "I don't believe it! He just. . . !"

"Shut up." The falls were only a few hundred yards away, but Carlos had to slow the Diablos down somehow or they'd never reach them. "Stay here," he whispered, then he scrambled up the boulder again, careful to keep his head down.

A quick peek through the rifle scope showed that the two figures were still beneath the bluffs. They were heading in his direction, but their heavy armor and the loose rock beneath their feet might buy him a few seconds. Switching off the IR, Carlos peered through the scope at the top of the bluffs. There it was: an icicle formation, precariously suspended above the rock slide far below. He took careful aim, then squeezed the trigger.

Bullets split through the ice. The formation shattered, plummeted to the ground. The Diablos had no time to react before hundreds of pounds

of ice cascaded down upon them. The one in front escaped the worst of it, but the rear Diablo was knocked off its feet. Something within its carapace must have shorted out, because it suddenly became visible: a sand-colored golem made of ceramic alloy, its enormous arms awkwardly thrown outward as the man inside struggled to regain balance. As it toppled and fell, the team leader lumberously turned toward it, he, too, now rendered tenuously visible by the ice and snow that covered his carapace.

Good. That might hold them for a few minutes. Carlos slid down off the boulder, wrenched Chris to his feet. "Get going! And if you do anything like that again, I swear I'll. . . !"

"They shot at me!" Holding his shoulder, Chris stared back at the Diablos. "I can't believe they. . . !"

"You're expecting a medal?" Carlos shoved him. "Hurry up, or I'm leaving you behind!" He wondered why he hadn't done so already.

They plunged through the forest, dodging large rocks and fallen timber, branches whipping their faces as they raced down the hillside. Carlos felt ice within his lungs, burning him from the inside out; he coughed, wiping snow from his face with his free hand. The dull rumble of the falls grew louder, becoming a roar; through the trees, he could make out a thin white haze. Chris blindly followed him, staggering with each step he took. They needed to rest, take care of his wound, but that was out of the question. It wouldn't be long before the Diablos recovered; soon they'd be on them again, tracking them by their body-heat signatures, the sound of their breathing. If they stopped, even for a second . . .

The rumble became a deep-throated roar, and suddenly they were through the trees. A chasm opened before them: a vast gorge, several hundred feet in diameter, an enormous sinkhole deep within the mountains. Sixty feet to the right, Goat Kill Creek plunged into the gorge, a sixty-foot waterfall spilling down upon foaming rocks. Water foamed at the bottom of the falls, churned away into the valley beyond.

Chris stopped, stared into the abyss. "Oh, great," he rasped. "Just wonderful. Now where are we going to. . . ?"

"This way." Carlos turned to the right, began making his way along the edge of the gorge. If they hadn't lost the trail, it would have led them straight to the top of Johnson Falls. As it was, they'd have to bushwack it. He could only hope that the Diablos were still behind them. . . .

From somewhere down in the valley, the distant chatter of automatic gunfire, echoing off the granite well of the gorge. That would be Marie's group, engaging the other Diablo team; they must have homed in on Constanza's signal. Yet his sister had the benefit of three armed men at her side, along with a stolen skimmer. All he had was his rifle. . . .

"It's not too late. . . ." Out of breath, holding onto his shoulder, Chris collapsed against a tree. He gazed at Carlos with red-rimmed eyes. "It's not too late to give up . . . if we surrender, they might just take us prisoner . . . that's all she wants. . . ."

"You want to stay here, go ahead." Carlos searched the wooded slope above them. No doubt that the Diablos were homing in on their voices. "Give her my best regards."

At first it seemed as if Chris was going to remain behind. Then he ap-

parently thought better of it; he staggered to his feet. "Hope you know where you're going."

Carlos nodded, turned away. He did . . . but he wasn't about to let Chris know that.

They continued moving toward the falls. Without a trail to follow, Carlos had to rely on his sense of the land. Over the course of the last three years, though, he'd explored every gully and knob of this valley; the terrain was now more familiar to him than the neighborhood in Huntsville where he'd spent his childhood. Somewhere farther up the hillside, he could hear faint noises; the Diablos weren't very far behind. The sound of rushing water was very loud now. Only a short way to go. . . .

A sudden flash of heat against his face, and suddenly a tree branch just above his head snapped and fell, missing him by only a few inches. "Run!" he yelled, and took off, not bothering to look to see where the shot had come from.

Now they were sprinting headlong through the forest. Carlos couldn't see the falls anymore; the gorge was somewhere behind him. Chris was right on his heels, panting as he struggled to keep up with him. Another beam sliced bark off a tree a few yards to their right. The Diablo team knew where they were, but they didn't have a clear line of sight; they were firing blindly into the woods. All he and Chris could do was stay in motion, and hope the trees would foul their aim.

They were above the falls, with the creek to their left and the hillside to their right, when Carlos came upon the trail they'd lost. "This way!" he snapped, then turned to the left, his boots thudding against the soft snow on the path as he headed straight for the creek. He knew exactly where they were now; the rest of the way was clear. If they could only make it a few more yards. . . .

And then, there it was: the bridge.

Fifty feet long, a long row of blackwood planks suspended by taut cables made of coiled tree vine, it rose above the rushing waters of Goat Kill Creek, faintly obscured by the lingering haze of the morning fog. Two days earlier, he and his team had crossed the bridge while the first flakes of snow of the approaching storm fell upon them. Now the planks were coated with a thin glaze of ice, the ropes collecting snow; the bridge seemed frail and weatherbeaten, but it was sturdy nonetheless.

Carlos sprinted past the two blackwood trees around which the support cables had been lashed. The bridge creaked as it took his weight, swayed slightly. On the way back, the shags would have waded across the shallows a little farther upstream while their riders leisurely marched across the bridge, but now the shags were gone and the bridge was his avenue of escape. Glancing back, he saw Chris right behind him. No time to savor the surprise on his face. Just a few more yards to the other side of the creek. . . .

Carlos was halfway across the bridge, barely touching the frayed hand ropes as he dashed across the slick boards, when he heard someone shout his name. Looking up, he saw a figure emerge from the woods on the opposite shore, waving both arms above his head. Carlos raised a hand, started to wave back . . .

"Down!"

Carlos barely heard Chris yell before he was knocked off his feet. He went face-down; the rifle fell from his hands, clattered upon the bridge behind him. He glanced up just in time to see a thumb-size hole appear on the walkway only a few inches away, melting the snow and causing the damp wood to sizzle.

Twisting sideways, he looked back, and for the first time he saw one of the Diablos clearly: a mechanical man, like a robot from one of the Japanese cartoons he'd watched on netv as a kid, only lacking a head. It stood at the end of the bridge, the sensor pod protruding from its massive chest peering at him like a cyclopean eye. The sausage-shaped particle-beam cannon mounted upon its right shoulder swiveled toward him. In that instant, he knew that the Diablo was locking him in its sights. The next shot wouldn't miss. . . .

"Run!" Chris shouted. "Go!" And then he brought up the rifle Carlos had dropped, opened fire upon the Diablo.

Armor pinged as bullets ricocheted. The Diablo staggered, but didn't fall. Now Carlos could see the second unit, coming down the trail just behind it. . . .

"Get out of here!" Chris didn't look back at him. "Go, dammit!"

Scrambling to his knees, Carlos grabbed the hand ropes. He'd barely hauled himself to his feet when there was a hollow *shush!* above his head.

What the hell. . . ?

A half-second later an explosion ripped across the place where the Diablos had been standing. He turned around to look. . . .

His feet slipped upon the wet planks. Off-balance, he tried to grab the ropes, but the bridge seemed to twist beneath him, and suddenly he was no longer on it.

For a timeless moment, he was suspended in midair, a limp doll flying through space. Then there was a tremendous blow against his back, and suddenly he was underwater.

A thousand tiny knives stung his face. He involuntarily gasped, and freezing water rushed into his lungs. Darkness closed upon him; fighting panic, he began to swim as hard as he could, kicking and clawing his way toward the shimmering blue light above him.

C'mon, c'mon, c'mon. . . ! *You can't die here!*

His head broke the surface. Coughing up water, Carlos began to thrash his way through the swift current. The undertow clutched at his ankles, threatening to yank him under once more. His thick clothing was waterlogged; it was as if the lining of his parka was filled with wet cement, his boots strapped to ten-pound weights. It was all he could do just to stay afloat.

Pain lanced through his right knee as it connected with a boulder he couldn't see. Gritting his teeth, Carlos floundered toward shore. It was still more than twenty feet away; now he could hear the roar of the falls as he was pulled toward them. Another dozen yards or so, and he would hurtle over the edge, falling into the gorge to be smashed against the boulders far below. . . .

He kicked harder, fighting to keep his head above water, trying to swim

with the current instead of against it. Foot by foot, the shore came closer; he spotted a dead tree that had fallen into the creek. He managed to reach it, but when he grabbed at a branch it broke off at the root, and the rapids seized him once again and hauled him away.

The roar was deafening. Water spat at his face, blinding him. Turning his head, he saw the edge of the falls less than a dozen feet away. But now his toes were touching sand, the soles of his boots sliding off rocks. If he could only grab hold of something, pull himself through those precious few inches that remained between him and dry land. . . .

Another boulder, rising from the waters only a foot from shore. The current swept him toward it. He wrapped his right forearm around the rock, held on with the last of his strength. He only had to reach out with his other hand, find something else to . . .

Something grasped the hood of his parka, hauled him upward. It was if a mighty hand had reached down from the sky to tear him out of the violent water, for in the next instant he was dragged from the creek and onto firm ground.

Carlos lay face-down on the riverbank, gasping for breath as he trembled against the frigid air. So cold, so incredibly cold. . . .

He saw a pair of boots, old and worn, with animal skins tightly wrapped around the ankles. Someone from Defiance. Probably the same guys who'd taken out the Diablo team. "Man, I'm so glad to see you," he mumbled as he raised his head. "I thought I . . ."

The face that peered down at him was inhuman.

An elongated jaw, covered with a coarse beard, with yellowed fangs protruding from his mouth. A filthy parka beneath a soiled white robe, a pair of leathery wings rising through slits on its back. Eyes dark but brilliant, kindly yet insane.

"Zoltan?" Carlos whispered.

From somewhere nearby, voices. The gargoyle looked up, glanced in their direction. Without another word, he stood up and scuttled away, heading for the waterfall only a few feet away. He climbed onto a large boulder overlooking the gorge. His wings extended to their full length; he raised his arms to grasp their leading edges with taloned hands.

"No!" Carlos yelled.

Then the figure flung himself into the chasm.

Carlos raised himself on his hands and knees just in time to catch a glimpse of a bat-winged shape gliding across Johnson Falls. Within moments it disappeared from sight, vanishing within the shadows of the trees at the bottom of the gorge.

He was still staring after it when Chris came up behind him. Several men were behind him; Carlos couldn't tell if they were following him or chasing him, and for the moment it didn't matter. "Hey, man, you all right?" he said, laying a hand on his arm. "We thought you were dead."

"I just . . ." Carlos found himself shaking, not so much from the cold but from the face he'd just seen. Would they believe him? He wasn't sure he believed it himself. From somewhere not far away, he heard a gyro approaching. They weren't out of trouble yet. "Never mind," he murmured. "Let's just get out of here."

Gabriel 76 / 0932—Fort Lopez

The screen showed two men on a rope bridge, one lying face-down, the other standing above him with a rifle, firing toward the camera. Then the camera zoomed past them, briefly focusing upon a couple of figures within the shadows of the trees on the other side of the creek. One of them bore something on his shoulder. Above the chatter of gunfire, they heard the squad leader's voice:

"Reinforcements spotted. Moving in to . . . oh, shit, they've got a. . . !"

A brief flash from the opposite side of the bridge. The last image was that of a small, dark shape hurtling toward the camera. Then the screen went blank.

"That's it, sir." Cartman looked up from his console. "No contact after that."

Baptiste said nothing. He didn't need another replay from Alpha Leader's external camera to know what had happened: the Diablo team had been taken out by a shoulder-launched RPG, probably a weapon stolen from Liberty during one of Rigil Kent's raids.

And it wasn't just Diablo Alpha that had been brought down. When Diablo Bravo had closed in upon Constanza's signal, about seven miles downstream from the falls, they found the missing patrol skimmer floating next to the creek bank, tied to a tree. It appeared to be abandoned, but when the Diablos moved in to investigate, they came under fire by a small group of armed men lurking on the nearby hillside. Bravo could have fought them off without any problem, but it turned out that they were only a diversion; the skimmer wasn't deserted, and the men aboard knew how to operate its chain gun. All contact with Bravo team was lost less than a minute later; ten minutes after that, Alpha went off-line.

Two Diablo teams—four specially trained soldiers, equipped with state of the art Union Guard combat armor—taken out by little more than guerrilla forces armed with stolen weapons. What was supposed to have been a tactical operation had become a total loss of men and equipment. Baptiste closed his eyes, rubbed his temples with his fingertips. It should have been easy. . . .

"Sir? Flight One and Flight Two are still on standby. Waiting for new orders."

Baptiste opened his eyes. Cartman patiently waited for him to tell them what to do now. The situation room had gone quiet, the officers seated at the consoles silently watching him. Two gyros remained on the scene, hovering at opposite ends of the operation zone; if the mission had been successful, then they would have retrieved Alpha and Bravo, perhaps even taken aboard prisoners. That wasn't going to happen now, though, was it?

"Tell them to return to base," Baptiste murmured. "We'll . . ."

"No. Cancel that order, Sergeant."

Luisa Hernandez had been standing off to one side, quietly observing events as they unfolded. Now she walked into the light, her back erect as she approached Baptiste. "We're not through yet, Captain. There's still work to be done."

Baptiste let out his breath. "With all due respect, Matriarch, I disagree. Our ground forces . . ."

"Nullified, yes. I'm aware of that." Her face was taut, her mouth drawn into a straight line. "Nonetheless, we still have two units in the air. We can use them to our advantage." Before Baptiste could object, she pointed to the screen he had just been studying. "Sergeant, run back what we just saw." Cartman turned back to his console, tapped a few keys. Once more, the last few seconds captured by the team leader's on-board camera appeared. "Freeze it. Look at this, Captain, and tell me what's out of place here."

Baptiste examined the image. Nothing here he hadn't seen twice already. "I don't understand what you . . ."

"The bridge, Captain. Look at the bridge. For almost nine years, we've searched every square mile of Midland, both from high orbit and from low-altitude sorties. Never once have we spotted anything like this. Now, out in the middle of nowhere, we find a rope bridge. Why do you think this is?"

Before he could answer, Hernandez marched over to the map wall. "No one builds a bridge unless they mean to use it," she continued as she pointed to the last known positions of Alpha and Bravo teams. "It can't be a coincidence that there were armed men in the area." Laying a fingertip upon the glass, she traced a circle around the upper part of the river valley. "Put it together. Their settlement must be located somewhere within range. If we act quickly enough, we may be able to find it."

Murmurs around the room as officers caught on to what she was saying. Baptiste found himself nodding in agreement. With two gyros still airborne over the valley, they might be able to backtrack the opposition's movements to their base camp. And yet . . .

"We can do this," he said, carefully choosing his words, "but I must urge you to be cautious. You may be overlooking something."

Hernandez scowled. "And that is?"

"We tried to lay a trap for them . . . but could it be that they've laid a trap for us?"

Gabriel 76 / 0946—Pioneer Valley

Carlos was pulling on a dry shirt when he heard voices from the mouth of the cave. Leaving the coarse tunic unbuttoned, he bent down to snatch up his rifle from where he had rested it against the wall. A few seconds later, the chopping thrum of rotors echoed through the tunnel as a gyro passed low overhead, just a few hundred feet above the gorge.

"Someone's coming." Seated near the lantern burning on the cave floor, Chris looked up. "Think it's the other Diablo team?"

Carlos didn't reply. He checked the cartridge; about eight rounds left. Not enough to hold off a determined assault. He glanced at Ted LeMare; the older man was guarding Chris, his rifle pointed at Chris's back. Ted said nothing, but his attention was no longer on their prisoner but on the cave entrance. Chris had sworn that he wasn't carrying another homing

device, and even if he was, they were far enough underground that a low-frequency radio signal wouldn't penetrate the granite around them. The gyro could simply be making another random sweep, as it had done three times already.

Chris had saved his life up on the bridge. But Carlos wasn't ready to trust him quite yet.

Jack Dreyfus was standing watch near the cave entrance. As the gyro moved away, he raised a hand to signal that the coast was clear, then disappeared from sight. More voices now, this time closer. One sounded like Barry; Jack was doubtless relieved to find that his son was still alive. Carlos relaxed; he put down his gun, reached for the wool sweater lying nearby. Jack wasn't the only one to be grateful; when Henry Johnson discovered this natural cave in the bluffs below the falls that now bore his name, he'd recommended that it be stocked with spare clothes, food, and a fish-oil lantern, just in case a hunting party who'd lost their way might need them at some future time. Henry's foresight had been correct; Carlos made a mental note to buy him a drink the next time he saw him.

Light flickered off the cave walls. Jack appeared a moment later, flashlight in one hand, his other arm around Barry's shoulder. Behind them were Marie, Lars, and Garth, with Jean Swenson bringing up the rear. Marie rushed past the others, almost dropping her rifle in her haste to embrace her brother. No words were necessary; they wrapped their arms around each other, and Carlos felt his sister tremble against him. The disgust he'd felt toward her only yesterday vanished; she was safe, and right now that was all that mattered.

"Welcome to the party." Ted lowered his gun, stepped away from Chris. "Got some food if anyone's hungry. Just beans, but . . ."

"Man, I'd eat a creek crab if . . . hey, there's the son of a bitch!" Chris had barely risen to his feet before Lars lunged across the cave to grab him by the collar of his jacket and slam him against the wall. Before anyone could stop him, he yanked a Union Guard automatic from his belt. "Man, I was hoping I'd see you again," he snarled, shoving it against Chris's face. "Payback time for you. . . !"

"Cut it out!" Carlos got his hand on the gun, pulled it away. "No one's paying anyone back! He's with us!"

"A little late for that," Marie said quietly, as Ted hauled Lars away from Chris. "His pal's already paid up."

Carlos looked at her. "Don't tell me you . . ."

"She had no choice." Barry went to assist Garth. For the first time, Carlos saw that the kid was walking with the aid of a tree branch, his right knee wrapped in a blood-stained bandage. "Constanza was playing possum all along," Barry continued as he helped Garth hobble over to the thin circle of warmth cast by the lantern. "After we made it to the rendezvous point yesterday, he dropped the shell-shock act and made a grab for Garth's rifle. He got off a shot before Marie took him down."

"Enrique was an intelligence agent." Chris's face was ashen; he avoided looking at anyone. "He was a civilian scientist, sure . . . I didn't lie about that part . . . but his primary mission was this operation. I guess he wanted to make sure that the skimmer didn't fall into enemy . . . your hands."

"We searched his body, found the tracking device." Barry helped Garth sit down, making sure that his wounded leg was set straight. "We tried to contact you, but of course we couldn't get through."

"My unit was switched off. The shags bolted when the gyros showed up, and that's when I lost it." Carlos nodded toward Chris. "He was wearing one, too. The whole thing was a set-up. We were supposed to capture them so that the Union Guard could track us down."

"But it backfired." Ted moved away from Lars. "When Marie called in and told us what happened, Captain Lee sent Jack and me out to find you guys and Jean to look for the others. Lucky for us that we caught up with you at the bridge."

"Lucky for us that you decided to pack an RPG, too." Carlos couldn't help but grin.

Jack shrugged. "No luck to it. We figured that you might be needing some heavy artillery if the Union was sending a squad after you."

"We left Constanza's tracker aboard the skimmer, then hunkered down and waited for them to show up." Marie bent down to check Garth's bandage. "The skimmer's gun was what saved us. Weren't counting on having those . . . what were those things, anyway?"

"Diablos. Nasty stuff." Chris was nervous, but he appeared to realize that he wasn't going to be executed so long as he cooperated. Or perhaps there was more to it than that; Carlos noticed how he kept looking at Ted, Jack, and Jean, former *Alabama* crew members, with newfound appreciation, familiar faces he hadn't seen in years. They were far from being long-lost friends, but neither were they strangers. "It's a good thing you managed to . . ."

"Stop yanking me." Lars wasn't in a forgiving mood. He took his gun back from Carlos; although he didn't aim at Chris again, neither did he return it to his belt. "If you guys hadn't screwed up, we'd all be prisoners by now. Or dead."

"And Constanza might have led them to Defiance." Barry glanced at Chris. "You had the right idea, leading him away like that."

"I had a hunch, that's all." Carlos shrugged. "It was the long way, but . . ."

"What sort of. . . ? Wait a minute, I don't get it." Now Chris was confused; he looked first at Barry, then at Carlos. "I thought you were taking me back to your camp."

Carlos kneeled down to the lantern. "Not the straight way, I wasn't," he said, warming his hands. "The path we took is a hunting trail. We put up the bridge late last year as an easy way of getting across the creek to Mt. Aldrich, but it's not the direct route to getting home."

"Then you knew . . ."

"I didn't know anything." Carlos shook his head. "Like I said, I only had a suspicion. That's why I told Barry to meet us upstream from where we found you. If your friends hadn't shown up, we would have crossed the bridge, then doubled back and met up with them a few miles down the creek. If everything looked safe, then we would have taken you to Defiance."

He clasped his hands together. "Which brings us back to here and now," he went on. "Technically speaking, you're a prisoner of war. Not only that, but you're a traitor, too."

"I told you why I did what I did. You heard what I said last night. . . ."

"That was last night. We didn't know you were setting us up." Carlos turned the lantern's wheel, feeding more fish oil to the wick to make it burn a little higher. Different campfire, but the same conversation, continued only a few hours later. "Cards on the table, buddy. Only way either of us are going to get out of this is to deal straight."

From somewhere outside, they could hear the Union gyros, prowling back and forth across the gorge as they searched for Rigil Kent. "We both have something to win," Carlos went on, "and we both have something to lose. You want to see your mother again . . . and believe me, she wants to see you, too. We've got an injured soldier, and no one wants to wait here until Hernandez sends in another Diablo team. And I think you know by now that the matriarch considers you expendable."

Chris slowly nodded. Everyone was watching him now. "We want to go home," Carlos continued. "Some of these guys would just as soon shoot you, but I'm willing to give you a second chance."

"I . . ." Chris hesitated. "Why would you do that?"

"Oh, for the love of . . ." Lars turned away in disgust. "Don't trust him. He's a friggin' boid in the brush."

"Shut up and gimme your radio." Carlos held out his hand, stared at Lars until he surrendered his unit. "A long time ago we were friends. We grew up together. Then I made a mistake, and then he made a mistake, and then . . ." He shook his head. "Maybe it's time we got past all that. Do you want to go home, Chris?"

For a moment, there was no one else in the cave. Just the two of them, guys who'd played army with toy guns, told each other dirty jokes, shared secrets about teachers and girls. They had gone to the stars together, watched their fathers die, gone on a misguided adventure and survived only to become distant from one another, and finally enemies. Yet Carlos knew that, even if Chris said no, he'd never kill him. He'd had that chance once already this morning, and hadn't taken it. For better or worse, Chris was still his friend.

"Yeah." Chris's voice was very quiet. "I'd like that."

Carlos nodded. "Okay. We can do that . . . but first you've got to prove yourself."

Chris watched as Carlos unfolded the radio antenna. "What do you want me to do?"

"You've been a traitor before." Carlos extended the unit to him. "Now I want you to be a traitor again."

Gabriel 76 / 1036—Fort Lopez

"Have they spotted him yet?" Baptiste approached Cartman; he was now monitoring communications from Flight One.

"No, sir. He's still . . ." The sergeant stopped, cupped a hand against his ear. "Just a moment. They've got movement on the river, not far from the falls."

"Pull up the forward camera." Baptiste watched as the middle screen of the carrel lit to display an image from the gyro's nose camera. Now he saw what its pilot was seeing: an airborne view of the gorge, the falls in the background, the creek directly below. The image tilted slightly to the right as the aircraft swung around. "Give me the audio feed, too," he added. "I want to hear what they're saying."

"Where's Flight Two?" Luisa Hernandez had come up to stand beside him. "They should be close by."

"Just saw something down there. Close to the creek bank, about seventy feet from the falls." The voice of Flight One's pilot was laced with static, yet discernible. *"Closing in. . . ."*

"Flight Two coming in to cover Flight One, ma'am." Without waiting to be told, Acosta tapped at her keyboard. The screen above her board showed an image from Flight Two's nose camera, nearly the same as Flight One's except from a higher altitude. The other gyro visible in the foreground, about two hundred feet below. "Do you want audio feed?"

"Negative." Baptiste spoke before the matriarch could respond; he caught the sour look on her face, but chose to ignore it. He didn't want to be distracted by cross-talk between the pilots. "Monitor their channel and tell me if something important comes up," he told Acosta, then returned his attention to the screen in front of him. "Patch me into Flight One," he said, then touched his jaw. "Flight One, this is Gold Ops. What do you have?"

The image steadied, became horizontal; the falls were no longer visible, and now they could only see the rushing waters of the creek. *"Gold Ops, we thought we saw something move down there. Could be our man. Coming down to check it out."*

"We copy, Flight One." Baptiste continued to stare at the screen. "Get ready for pick-up, but keep a sharp eye out. We don't know what's down there. Over."

"Suspicious, aren't you?" During all this, Gregor Hull had glided up behind him; now the savant stood between him and the matriarch, a black-robed specter, aloof yet omnipresent. "You don't trust our man any more?"

Baptiste gnawed his lower lip, refrained from making a comment. No, he did not. Ten minutes ago, Flight One had received a radio message on a coded frequency from Chief Proctor Levin. Everyone else involved in this operation had been lost so far, and Levin's tracer had failed almost two and a half hours ago. Now, suddenly, he'd made contact with them, claiming that he'd escaped from his captors and requesting rescue, with pick-up in the gorge below the falls.

Baptiste shot a glance at the matriarch from the corner of his eye. Her face remained stoic, registering no emotion. The moment the Diablo teams had hit the ground, she'd written off Levin as expendable; he'd been little more than bait for Rigil Kent, not worth saving if he got in the way. Now that he was known to be alive, she wanted him back. All well and good. The mission had been a failure; they might be able to salvage something from it yet.

Nonetheless, before Diablo Alpha had been brought down, the team leader's camera had captured two men on the bridge. The camera had moved away before their blurred features could be discerned, but one of

them had opened fire upon the hunter-killer team just moments before it was wiped out.

He could have been Carlos Montero. That was what the matriarch believed. Yet he might have been someone else. . . .

"Visual acquisition." The pilot's fuzzed voice jerked him from his reverie. *"We got someone, Gold Ops. Two down, dead ahead. . . ."*

Baptiste rested his hands upon the back of Cartman's chair, leaned close to study the screen. Yes, there he was: a small figure, standing on a boulder near the creek's edge, waving both hands above his head. The camera zoomed in, caught a face: a young man, in his late twenties, with long blond hair and a short beard.

"That's him." The matriarch smiled. "Flight One, go down and take him aboard."

"I don't think that's . . ."

"We need him," she said, barely glancing his way. "He's been in close contact with Rigil Kent. He may know something we . . ."

"Gold Ops! We're. . . !"

A sharp bang, followed by a high-pitched screech. In the same instant, the screen went dark. "Flight One down!" Acosta shouted. "Flight One is down!"

Hernandez's mouth dropped open. "What? I . . . what did you. . . ?"

Baptiste shoved her aside, bolted toward the next carrel. Acosta stared at her screen, watching in open-mouthed horror as a flaming mass plummeted into the creek, rotors still spinning as it disintegrated against the rocks. "It just . . . sir, it just . . ."

"Get them out of there!" Baptiste yelled. The warrant officer was in shock, unable to perform her duty; he shoved her aside, stabbed at the console. "Flight Two, this is Gold Ops! Get out of there! Return to base at. . . !"

"No!" The matriarch rushed forward, tried to pull Baptiste away from the console "He's down there! Rigil Kent is down there! We've almost got. . . !"

Baptiste turned around, shoved her away with both hands. Staggering back, she tripped over the feet of the sergeant; she would have fallen to the floor if one of bodyguards hadn't been there to catch her. "Hold her!" Baptiste yelled, snapping his finger at the guardsman. "Detain the matriarch! That's an order!"

The soldier hesitated, caught in a moment of uncertainty between whose authority was higher. Baptiste was a Union Astronautica senior officer, though, while Hernandez was a civilian; his duty was clear. He gently grasped Hernandez's arm, murmured something to her. For a moment it seemed as if she would resist, then she surrendered.

"We copy, Gold Ops. Returning to base." Baptiste looked at the screen again, saw the gorge disappear as the gyro peeled away. The pilot was probably grateful to receive the order to withdraw. Someone down there had an RPG; the next heat-seeker had his name on it.

"You're out of line, Captain." Hernandez glowered at him, still held back by the guardsman. "I can have you placed under arrest for this."

"No, ma'am, you can't." Before Bapiste could respond, Savant Hull stepped forward. "This is a military operation, and Captain Baptiste is the commanding officer. In this instance, his authority supersedes yours."

She stared first at him, then at Baptiste. "You can't. . . ."

"It's done." Baptiste let out his breath. "The operation is over. I'm not going to put anyone else at risk just so that . . ."

"Matriarch?" Acosta looked over at her. "Flight Two says they're receiving another ground transmission. The person sending it says he wants to talk to you . . . personally."

For a second, no one said anything. "Put it on so that we can all hear," Baptiste said quietly. "And tell Flight Two to remain on station."

A few moments passed while the orders were carried out. Then the fuzzed tones of a low-frequency radio signal filled the situation room, and they heard a young man's voice:

"Matriarch Hernandez, do you hear me?"

Acosta nodded, indicating that she was patched into the com link. The matriarch prodded her jaw. "I hear you, Chief . . . Chris, I mean. Good to know you're alive and well."

"Yeah, I'm still here." A short, rancorous laugh. *"How nice of you to be concerned, considering that one of your men put a hole in me. Know what a laser feels like when it's going through your shoulder? Hurts like hell, lemme tell you."*

"I'm sure it was a mistake." The left corner of the matriarch's mouth twitched upward. "We tried to pick you up, but we came under enemy fire. If you'll tell us where you are, we can make another attempt."

A low hiss from behind Baptiste. From the corner of his eye, he saw Cortez standing nearby. Like everyone else in the room, he was quietly listening to this exchange. The matriarch's calm self-assurance had returned; she cast a smug look at Baptiste. This wasn't over yet. She'd get her man back, and then they'd hunt down Rigil Kent.

"No, I don't think so, but thanks anyway. Before I go, though, a friend of mine would like to talk to you."

The matriarch's eyes widened. She was about to reply when another voice came over. *"Matriarch Hernandez, this is Rigil Kent. . . ."*

Murmurs swept through the room; Baptiste heard someone mutter something obscene. Acosta reached to her console, trying to get a lock on the source of the signal. *"I'm going to make this quick,"* the voice continued. *"You've succeeded in getting a lot of your people killed today. I'm sorry for that, but you picked the fight, not us. We appreciate one thing, though . . . convincing Chris that he was on the wrong side. He's back with us now. Thanks for that, at least."*

Hernandez's face had gone pale. "You . . . you're holding him prisoner," she stammered. "I demand that you . . . that you release him immediately before we . . ."

"You're in no position to demand anything, Matriarch. Now go away. This is our home, and you're not wanted here."

The transmission ceased suddenly, as if someone at the other end had flipped a switch. Baptiste looked down at Acosta, and she shook her head; she'd failed to pinpoint its source. "Tell Flight Two to return to base," he murmured, and then he turned to speak to the matriarch.

Luisa Hernandez was no longer listening. Without another word, she turned her back on him and walked away. No one dared to speak or even look at her as she strode through the operations center, followed a few

steps behind by her reluctant bodyguard. The guardsman stationed at the exit saluted as she marched past him; his stiff gesture went unacknowledged. Winter sunlight briefly streamed through the door, followed by a cold draft before it slammed shut again.

It was a bad morning for the colonial governor of Coyote.

Gabriel 76 / 1803—Defiance, Midland

Twilight came as a gradual lengthening of shadows upon the snow-covered ground, cast by Uma as it sank behind the peaks of Mt. Shaw. A cool wind drifted through the blackwoods, curling the wood smoke that rose from fieldstone ovens sheltered by the forest canopy, causing bamboo chimes to gently rattle and clank in random melody. As darkness closed upon the village, vegetable oil lamps flickered to life within treehouse windows. Dogs barked as they helped their masters herd goats and sheep into their pens; within work sheds on the ground, glassblowers and pottery makers extinguished their kilns, put away their tools. The evening air was filled with the aroma of cooking food; here and there were the creaking of rope ladders, the muted buzz of conversation, an occasional laugh. The day was done; Defiance was settling down for the night.

"I can see why they never found you." Chris walked alongside Carlos as they strolled along a path leading through the center of town. All around them, small wood-frame cabins were suspended within the boughs of enormous trees, with rope ladders leading to floor hatches and porches dangling to the ground below. "A hundred people here. . . ."

"A hundred and fifty-two. Like you said, we've been having a population explosion lately." Chris glanced at him, and he shrugged. "We've had a few more babies, and we've picked up some people from your side of the river."

"All these people in one place, and the Union never figured out where you were." Chris winced as he shook his head. He'd spent the better part of the afternoon in the clinic, letting Dr. Okada tend to his shoulder wound, yet every move he made hurt a little. "But the farms, the grazing land. How did you. . . ?"

"See all those poles over there?" Carlos pointed toward a broad meadow near the edge of the forest. "That's where we hang camouflage nets. From above, it looks like just another empty field. Can't tell we've got crops there unless you approach them from the ground." He had already shown Chris the water tanks, the grain sheds, the communal privies and bathhouses, all concealed by the blackwoods surrounding them. "We're careful about how we do things," he added. "There's some rules you're going to have to learn."

"Like what?"

As he said this, a figure came toward them: Ron Schmidt, who long ago had worn the uniform of the United Republic Service. Now he wore a catskin serape over his patched URS parka, a carbine slung on its strap from his shoulder. "Ten minutes," he murmured. Carlos raised a hand and he went on, pausing to shine a flashlight beam upon a couple of children playing on a catwalk between two treehouses.

"That's one of 'em," Carlos said. "No one outdoors after sundown except the night watch. Keeps down on thermal emissions . . . especially important during winter. The chimneys have caps on them, and all the windows have shutters. In ten minutes, it'll be dark as hell around here. Unless you know where to look, you'd never know there was someone living here."

"Looks like you've got it all figured out."

Carlos shook his head. "No, not really. We've been lucky so far. The Union hasn't found us because they didn't know where to look. But now they know we're somewhere in this valley, so they're going to come searching for us. I don't think trees and camouflage nets are going to hide us much longer."

"And you're going to blame me for this, right?"

"Uh-uh." Carlos stopped, turned toward him. He couldn't see Chris's face, yet he could hear the accusation in his voice. "So far as I'm concerned, our bills are paid. You're going to have to work things out with everyone else, but . . ."

He stopped. They weren't friends again; there were still many things that had to be settled between them. On the other hand, neither were they enemies any more. They would just have to see how things would come out, one day at a time. "When push came to shove, you did the right thing," he finished. "That'll get around."

"Yeah, well, maybe." Chris didn't seem convinced. "I've been away awhile. I'm going to have to . . ."

From a treehouse not far away, someone played a bamboo flute. An old tune, "Soldier's Pay," dating back to nineteenth century America. A few seconds later, a second flute joined in, a little more hesitantly, as if the second person was still learning the melody.

Chris listened, turning his head to focus upon the music. "Is that her?" he asked quietly.

"That's her. She's been getting better. Allegra's been a great help."

"I thought she'd be. That's why I introduced 'em." Chris started to walk toward the treehouse, then stopped. "Look, there's one thing I've got to know . . ."

"Sure." Carlos shoved his hands in his pockets. "What is it?"

"When you found me, you had a feeling that this was all a set-up, but you didn't shoot me. Then you found out for sure that it was a trap, and you didn't shoot me. And then I tried to give you away to the guys who were chasing us, and still you didn't shoot me. . . ."

"Yeah? And. . . ?"

Neither of them said anything for a few moments. "Nothing," Chris said at last. "Just checking."

"Go on home," Carlos said quietly. "I think your mother's calling you."

An old line, remembered from a shared childhood, long ago and far away. Chris laughed softly, understanding something that didn't need to be said, then turned to walk toward the light gleaming through the cracks of a shuttered treehouse window.

Carlos watched him go. It was late, and he was tired. His wife and child were waiting for him. He turned around, began making his way through the night. For the moment, at least, all was well. Now it was time to go home. ❍

WEALTH

Robert Reed

Robert Reed's next novel, which is tentatively entitled *The Sword of Creation,* is a sequel to *Marrow.* It should be out later this year from Tor. The idea for "Wealth" came directly from an open-house tour he made of a local mansion that had been left empty and in poor condition.

One of the biogenesis trillionaires acquired the land, then, with considerable fanfare, built the mansion, and for a moment or two, there was no more famous address in the solar system. An artful array of hemispheres stood on the edge of the wide basin. Woven from cultured diamond, the structures had both strength and a mathematical beauty, and, in the Martian sunshine, they glowed with a charming ruddy light. A larger, less obtrusive dome formed a soaring roof over the entire basin, allowing the maintenance of an enhanced atmosphere. In principle, the trillionaire had resurrected a world that hadn't existed for three billion years. Precious aquifer water was pumped into the basin, creating a deep saline lake that was allowed to freeze over to a depth of several meters. Fission batteries powered hot springs that fed the tiny streams that opened up little patches of ice along the rocky shoreline. Then a variety of tailored microbes were introduced, each carefully modeled after Martian fossils, and it was that chill prehistoric scene that wowed guests and the invited media as well as a distant and utterly envious public.

But any man's fortune can prove as frail as that long-ago Martian summer. A skiing accident on Olympus Mons killed the trillionaire before his hundredth Earth-year. Competing heirs and endless tax troubles soon divided his fortune into many little wedges. His youngest daughter ended up with the mansion, living inside it whenever she wasn't traveling to distant enclaves dedicated to the nearly wealthy.

And all the while, Mars was being remade. The icecaps were melted, the old northern sea was reborn, a serviceable atmosphere was cultured from comet bones, and, after another century, there was no Mars anymore, just a small and chilled and very muddy version of the Earth. No longer needed, the overhead dome was dismantled. The icy lake melted and evaporated until nothing remained but a smelly blue-gray marsh. Then the daughter, in her twelfth decade, found herself broke. To raise capital, she sold the surrounding lands in a piecemeal fashion. The marsh was drained and developed, a little city erupting on her doorstep. Eventually, she owned nothing but the old mansion and the surrounding

hectares, and when she died, still broke, her property was sold to a series of unrelated owners, each endowed with energy and limited means and precious little aesthetic taste.

The original structure has been severely, brutally remodeled. A glance tells as much, while the careful stare reveals scars left behind by a parade of robot slaves and human craftsmen, nations of nanofabricators, and at least one clumsy slathering of smart-gels. The diamond hemispheres have been stained to a deeper red and then punctured in dozens of places. Windows have been added. The original airlocks have been replaced with ugly dilating doorways. Someone with an inappropriate fondness for Earthly architecture believed that thick Dorian columns would give a much-needed flourish to the main entrance. My burning temptation is to obliterate this travesty. Before moving inside, I want to give a command and watch while the portico is crushed into an artful pile of slag.

I barely defeat my temptation.

Past the dilating doorway waits an empty room. Spiraling stairs lead upward. Flanking doors lead into other equally empty rooms. From the feel of the place, it is obvious: No one lives here now. But little voices and tiny motions betray the presence of visitors. Which is only reasonable, since this is the first and only day when the old mansion will let itself be placed on public display.

I absorb voices, motions. Quietly, I pass through a series of increasingly spacious rooms. The floors are covered with cultured woods and living—if rather decrepit—rugs. Not a stick of furniture is visible, but indifferent cleaning and constant wear show where heavy chair legs stood for years. Where the first dome ends, I can peer into the neighboring dome—a single chamber encompassing a lake-sized tank meant for swimming humans or pet dolphins, or emancipated dolphins, perhaps. But the pond has been drained, and, judging by the black dust in the bottom, it has been empty for some time.

The loudest voices come from a third dome, and I retreat to follow them, passing into what must be a kitchen.

Meals have been prepared here: Organic feasts, and, later, other elaborately flavored energies. Two figures stand beside a laser oven. One of them is traditionally human, but with an AI add-on. "I just wanted to look around," he confesses. Then, flashing a bright smile, he admits, "I live out on the bottoms, and I've always been curious. The owner . . . I never actually spoke with him . . . but I meant to, and then, all at once, just the other day . . . he was gone. No warning. And this morning, I saw that the house is being offered. . . ."

"Yes," says the other figure. "I am for sale."

She is for sale. What I see only appears human, out of convention or some deeply buried wetware, or perhaps because the house thinks it helps its own prospects if it resembles a handsome human woman on the brink of menopause. Bright dark eyes glance at me and then return to the man in front of her. But other eyes continue to study me, from a wide array of vantage points, just as they have watched me for the last little minute.

"All at once," the neighbor repeats. "What I heard . . . I heard your owner got himself into a little trouble. . . ."

The house wears a lean face, a charming nest of wrinkles gathered beside her human eyes.

"Legal problems," the neighbor claims. "From what I've heard, your owner's moving out to the Kuiper belt, which means weeks of travel before legal services—"

"I am for sale," she repeats.

The neighbor stands alone, suddenly ignored.

The house appears before me. Her smile is meant to be calm but friendly, warm but not too effusive. She knows what I am, who I am. She says one of my names with a measured fondness, adding, "Welcome, good sir. And if you have any questions—"

"*I* have questions," the neighbor complains.

"About my history. My importance. My potentials." She breathes the air in which I stood just a moment ago, and she smiles, and the wrinkles on a her illusionary flesh realign themselves—a delicate detail that only someone such as myself would notice, much less appreciate. The pattern is fractal. A soothing mathematics is on display. "For the right owner," she maintains, "I could serve quite nicely."

I have no doubts about that.

The neighbor approaches us. Me. He stares at what passes for my face, his artificial intelligence finally fixing an identity to me.

"Wealth," the man mutters, which is my surname.

Then his legs collapse beneath him, and he grabs himself around his gasping chest, muttering, "Holy shit!" with a pained yet joyous amazement.

Wealth has been as simple as a keg of wine and the roasted limbs of a dozen fattened lambs, and from that plentitude, a wondrous feast would spring. Wealth has been a forest of oil derricks pumping the black blood out of the Earth, leaky pipes and noisy trucks delivering the treasure to a coughing, poisoned public. Wealth has meant being a king descended from the gods. Wealth has been an empire springing from AI software that is three weeks more advanced than any other. Wealth has been fragile. But life, on the other hand, has always been a persistent constant, relentless and enduring. Eventually, everyone owns their own keg of wine, and the black blood runs dry, and there are no gods in anyone's sky, and the software that had a death grip on the economic breath of a dozen worlds is suddenly found wanting. But life breathes and times change, and what was the spectacular fortune has been whittled away, and everything that remains appears smaller and a little drab against the relentlessly swelling worth of All.

I am Wealth, but I am Life, too.

The neighbor man claims, "This is such an honor!" and then finds the strength to stand again. Blinking away tears, he adds, "Thank you."

"It is my pleasure," I reply.

He turns to the house, explaining, "My income . . . a fat part of it, at least . . . it comes straight from *him*. . . !"

"I believe you," she says.

I have enough life in me to feel warmed by praise, no matter how trivial. But I've come here for a purpose, and this seems like the best moment to ask, "What is your listed price?"

She blurts it.

I nod, offering no comment. But my face grows smoother, my gaze much more distant now.

"A great price!" the neighbor declares. "Damn, the owner . . . the poor bastard . . . he must be desperate!"

Fleeing to the edge of civilization is the act of a desperate man. Asking for a pittance for your left-behind home is sloppy and rude, and it is foolish, and it makes me a little sad.

Has my interest lagged? The house gazes at my face and my temporary body, and, after some consideration, she says, "Please look around. Absorb and imagine. Just the history of this mansion makes a tour worthwhile."

Agreed.

"You know," the neighbor trumpets, "I'm almost tempted to make an offer."

Neither of us responds.

Then, with a louder, more insistent voice, he adds, "It's really a lovely old house. I think so, at least."

The house knows what she is, and a wounded, embarrassed look twists her face.

Quietly, I tell the man, "You can't afford the asking price."

His face stiffens.

"In fact," I add, "in another six cycles, you'll be hard pressed to make the rent payments on your own little house."

"What—?"

With a gesture, I produce a set of simple, durable projections showing his spending trends and income possibilities.

He flinches, asking, "How do you know that?"

"Because when you were a newborn, your maternal grandfather gave me a tidy sum," I explain. "The sum was attached to your name, and, as instructed, I nourished it for him, and then for you. But eighteen Martian years ago, you began siphoning off the profits. Which was your right, of course. And last year, you reduced the principal by a third. Which was your privilege, and I would never say, 'No.' Yet any busy mind can look at the public records, making inferences, and while I can't see everything about you or your spending patterns. . . ." I hesitate, just for an instant. Then with a calm, cold voice, I tell him, "In another year, you will be broke."

"No," he rumbles.

I turn back to the house. "Yes, I think I will look about."

She says, "Good."

"No," the man cries out again. But he has no reason to debate, and he knows it. With a sob, he asks, "What can I do?"

I tell him. In clear, unalloyed terms, I spell out the considerable failures of his tiny life. Two drug habits must be controlled. Travel is a needless expense when immersion rooms are cheap. Cultured food is more nour-

ishing than the fare grown in hydroponics tanks. One undemanding sexual partner is cheaper than three demanding ones, and, with a wink, I add, "A greased hand and your own mind is cheaper still, if you know what I mean."

Quietly, fiercely, the man says, "Bastard."

If he means me, then it is an inaccurate statement.

After some determined stomping and growling, he storms away. The house smiles as he hurries out through the ugly portico. And then she turns back to me, and, with a genuinely caring tone, she asks, "Do you think he'll take your advice?"

"About investments, I am wise," I purr. "About the human mind, I fear, I'm a hopeless incompetent."

For generations, humans argued about machines thinking: Was it even possible, and, if so, when and how would we become sentient? According to most of the optimistic, self-proclaimed experts, the first artificial souls would be cultured by the military or by the more exotic and demanding sciences. But arms and knowledge have never been central to human affairs. Above all else, *money* is what matters. Long ago, mutual funds and the great stock markets of the Earth were shepherded by complex tangles of software and then wetware. Cash, both electronic and paper, gradually acquired the hallmarks of identity: Individual names and personal histories, plus a crude desire to survive. Just tagging the money to keep it from being lost, whether inside a sofa or some despot's hypervault, was a critical leap. When money genuinely *talks,* the voices that prove more effective and vigorous tend to prosper—a multitude of selection forces brought to bear on knots of code as well as slips of parchment wearing the faces of dead presidents.

I am the merger of money and mutual fund wetwares.

A bastard has no legal father, but I enjoyed a trillion fathers and one lovely mother housed inside a Jupiter-grade server living inside an air-conditioned building in Old New Jersey.

In a rude sense, the purpose of a human is to eat and make babies. While the purpose of Wealth—my purpose and that of my brethren—is to embrace capital and then nourish it. No man or woman, trillionaire or not, possesses my clear, unbiased view of the future. When I was a young soul, small but brazen, I thrived by making predictions about the movements of capital from moment to moment. Later, I won notice by guessing which of three competing propulsion designs would power the first probe to Alpha Centauri, buying the appropriate stock, and then selling the bulk of my holdings just before the project was canceled. Then, when the AIs of the world were to be emancipated, I saw an array of possibilities. When I was no longer anyone's slave, I purchased my mother as well as the outdated, overpriced corporation that had owned her, and, with the power of a free soul, I gave her wetware and high-functions, transforming her from a simple chain of computers into a self-aware, self-respecting entity.

With bitter voices and snarling attorneys, my mega-billionaire clients accused me of being sentimental. It was an accusation with a nugget of

truth, but that was far from the point. A few complainers tried to withdraw their funds. With a voice drenched in fiduciary terms, I reminded them that I was not a bank account or a stack of dusty bonds. I was a soul who happened to control enough wealth to build a fat nation. For good reasons, I said, "I won't give you a copper penny now." Without any legal standing, I said, "Sign these forms and send them to my central office, and in another week, if you are still willing, I'll honor your stupidity."

My clients threatened me, and their lawyers threatened me, and a few even hired thugs to attempt some kind of viral thievery.

But, in the end, they loved me.

My mother's purchase and my kindness toward her caught the gaze of millions of newly freed entities. AIs designed for science and for security, weather prediction and limousine driving, liked what they saw and gave me whatever pennies they could spare. And in a single afternoon, my value doubled.

Life endures.

I am still growing, and along a few important tangents, I continue to gain experience and a measure of wisdom. Being individuals, each Wealth cultivates a different strength. My greatest capacity is to peer into the future, whether it is next year or some era unborn, and, with a clear, unsentimental eye, I wager my golden blood on targets that perhaps no one else can see.

Other neighbors are touring the old house. One is a blended woman—part chimpanzee, part add-on—who dresses like a human and talks like a snob. "This isn't much of a bathroom," she complains, her broad apish back turned to me. "The fixtures. The stains. And have you ever seen counters as low as this?"

"It was a child's bathroom," I offer. "That's why they're low."

Something about my voice alerts her or her add-on AI. One of them turns the other, both staring at me with a mixture of astonishment, awe, and some less pretty emotions.

"No," she blurts. "I don't believe it."

"Believe what?"

"You aren't," she complains. Then she steps up to me, sure enough about my falsity that she can poke me in the chest. "What kind of game are you?"

"A game that wins," I reply. Then in one long and smooth and utterly convincing sentence, I tell her what her name is and what her net worth is and where she lives and what she pays for rent, and before she can react, I describe the very sorry state of affairs inside her own tiny bathroom.

"How do you know that?" she sputters. "Even if you are who you claim to be, you shouldn't know about the insides of my house. And certainly not that my toilet smells!"

"But I should know," I growl. "If I am your *landlord,* I should."

The fur on her shoulders and back lifts high. But her instincts are submerged by a little good sense and the add-on's tempering touch. She backs away, exiting from the room by a second doorway. And I spend a

moment or two regarding myself inside a mirror of diamond lain over silver—a design popular when the gemstone was first cultured en masse, creating a tool of self-appraisal too stubborn to wear out and too simple to ever grow obsolete.

In a high room, near the top of the main dome, a plain flat photograph hangs above a mock fireplace. One item is ridiculous—the burning of gas or logs is strictly prohibited on Mars—but the other has a charm of its own. Taken not long after the mansion was first built, the photograph shows the mansion from the old lake shore, the various interlocking domes practically glowing beneath a high sky that was cold enough to burn and empty enough to suck the life out of unprotected flesh.

"Do you like this image?" asks the house.

Again, she speaks through the middle-aged body and an easy, slightly worried smile. I smile back at her, remarking, "Very much, yes."

"I didn't know."

I ask, "What didn't you know?"

"That you have a taste for history."

I have a taste for everything, because everything impacts on my life and the lives of my billions of happy clients. One of my talents allows me to read the house's face, and I know to say nothing now. Just let the silence speak for me.

"Are you really interested?" she inquires.

"In the past?"

"In me." Her worry pushes forward, growing into a warm despair. "I know what you are. You never go anywhere, in a physical form, unless you have a compelling reason—"

"I am," I interrupt. "In you, yes. I am interested."

Now she tries silence.

I look at the photograph again, paying closest attention to the frozen lake in the foreground.

"What will you pay for me?" The question bursts out of her, followed by the simple confession, "My owner left me with full discretion. I am free to make the best possible deal in the shortest period of time."

She is not legally sentient. Since sentience is defined legally, it is relatively easy to give common objects enough mental power and personality to perch on the edge of what should be free.

I feel sorry for her.

But in the same moment, I hold fast to my own needs. Quietly and firmly, I tell her my bid for her land and buildings, the worn-out rugs, and this single old photograph of a once-grand palace.

She steps back, startled.

"No," she says.

Then with a low gasp, she adds, "I must have heard you wrong. What's your offer again?"

I lift my temporary hand, curling one finger against the base of my thumb.

"A piece of copper," I say. "This big. With a face on one side and columns on the other."

She looks stunned, and frightened.

"A penny," I say. "That's the ancient name for the coin."

And suddenly, I am alone again, standing before the abomination of a fireplace that has probably never burned so much as a molecule, and that image of a great home lost to the ages.

More visitors tour the house, and most eventually find me. Awkward silences are as common as effusive praise. A few beg for the chance to be photographed standing beside me. One of the visitors—an AI child, as it happens—smiles hopefully at me, asking, "Are you going to live here?"

"That's not a very reasonable question," his parent warns. "Wealth doesn't live inside houses."

"'Wealth lives everywhere,'" he quotes.

"Exactly," says the parent.

Then the child turns back to me, wondering aloud, "Will you live everywhere and in here, too?"

I laugh, quietly and happily.

Then I wander down to the ground floor again, eventually finding a simple drop-tube that takes me into the basement. The stink of earthly molds and fossil water fills what passes for my nose. The foundation is unexpectedly ornate: Blocks of carved basalt, each exposed face decorated with magnified cross sections of ancient bacteria, the Martian DNA using its own language to weave together an array of odd amino acids. Time and the shifting ground have made little fissures at the joints. Otherwise, the old home rests on a sturdy, masterly base.

In one corner of the basement, between empty emergency tanks of oxygen, hides an ancient staircase cut from the native stone, plunging even deeper underground.

Intrigued, I follow.

Down, and down, and then, after a brief hallway, the stairs take me down into a little room surrounded by a fierce warmth. One wall is a diamond pane, and behind the wall are a fission battery and a fractured zone where water is heated to near boiling, slow chemical reactions feeding a multitude of patient organisms that look to the eye like a simple colorless gel.

"He would come down here just to watch his bugs," I hear.

The house has conjured up the woman again. A wronged, somewhat bitter woman this time. But she attempts to sound polite, explaining, "He built these species himself, you probably know. It was a hobby. Really, he was fascinated by the ancient Mars."

"I am too," I say.

She nods, and waits.

After a long silence, and with some difficulty, she asks, "Did you really mean that? A penny for all of me?"

I show her the copper coin.

"Why would I ever. . . ?" She hesitates. "Wait. You're offering more than money, aren't you?"

"I will never sell you," I promise.

She doesn't know what to say.

"I intend to hold you for the long term," I explain. "As part of a much larger, much more ambitious investment."

"I see."

"You don't," I warn. Then I look at her fractal-rich face and the sad, worried eyes, asking, "Do you ever wonder? What kinds of life would have evolved on Mars, if this world had remained warm and alive?"

"Yes," she whispers. "I've tried to picture it, yes."

"Yet nobody knows," I add. Then with my empty hand, I touch the warm face of the diamond, confessing, "I own some of the nearby houses."

"In the bottoms?" she guesses.

"And in every other part of Mars," I tell her. "'Nearby' means the world, and I own many of the key businesses and industries, and I have a significant interest in corporations and commercial-nations that are essential to the Martian economy."

She says nothing.

"In a little while, I will empty Mars."

She shudders.

"'In a little while' means within the next two or three thousand years," I explain. "And I'll do it gently, with a minimum of disruption. Of course, this world has never been essential to the solar system, and it won't be seriously missed. I'll keep everything warm and wet, and after another five or ten thousand years, I doubt if any sentient soul will give this place more than a glancing look. And in another million years, or a billion . . . however long it takes . . . a fresh and unique and lovely biosphere will arise, stepping out into a universe ready for something new. . . ."

She shudders.

Weakly, she asks, "Me?"

"I will not sell you, and I will keep you well-maintained, and whenever I visit Mars, this is where I will stay."

"In my rooms?"

"In this room," I offer.

She almost surrenders. Almost. But then with a tight little laugh, she says, "No. I want more than just a penny."

"How much more?"

"Two pennies."

With a flourish, I bring a second coin out of hiding. But before I hand it to the house, making the deal final, I warn her, "But you cannot tell anyone. That you bargained for double my initial offering. . . ."

She snatches up both of the slips of copper.

Then, for another long while, we watch creatures too small to have names or souls, watch them fiercely going about the relentless business of life. ○

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WE'LL HAVE MANHATTAN

Judy Klass

Judy Klass teaches English at a community college. She writes poetry, plays, and country songs. Her stories have appeared in *Space & Time, Tales of the Unanticipated, Harpur Palate, Satire,* and *Wind Magazine*. Ms. Klass invites you to say hello at her website: <*www.JudyKlass.com*>.

August 24, 2014

Orientation crawls on forever. Let us out of Jersey, let us go home. There are endless forms they want us to sign, electronic and hard copy. Yes, we understand the risks, it's all been fully explained. No, we will not hold the Federal Government or the State of New York liable for whatever happens. Covering their asses, that's all this little summer camp is about.

Meanwhile, I'm trying to make some friends, forge some alliances; 612 of us have been here since last week, and twenty more joined us yesterday. A lively assortment of Terminals, Chronics, and Rocky Drugsters. We don't get enough time to hang out and socialize among ourselves, with all the seminars, safety films and VR sessions, and hands-on how-to classes with our medical palm pilots. (I've already named mine Spot. Maybe if I think of it as some kind of symbiotic pet, I won't mind being monitored so closely.) But I'd say there are seven women and fifteen men I'm on a joking, easy, first-name basis with here, aside from Leonard. And that's good. 'Cause all we're gonna have is each other, once we hit the Baked Apple.

Leonard and I are rooming together, and we turn some heads, but not like we would have back in Des Moines. Hell, Leonard could've turned heads there just by Walking or Driving While Black. Now, we're close enough to home, to what used to be the City, that it's not such a big deal, us being a couple. He's a dramatic-looking guy, though: tall, solid as a fridge, dark and bald. With a rich, rolling, Jamaican accent and an easy, courtly manner that prison has not dented. So, maybe some of the double-takes we get are just because I've got myself such a fine-looking man.

They want us to introduce ourselves and our situations in these diaries, so—briefly. Leonard's the reason I'm doing this. Holed up in Des Moines as

I've been for most of my exile, I caught sight of an ad he placed in the main on-line journal for people like us, the *NYC Diaspora*. His item said that he was interested in the re-settlement process, was filing the papers there in Sing Sing, and wanted to hear from others who were considering it.

I poured out my heart in my letter to him—one of those over-the-top emails to a stranger you write when you're lonely and you've hit bottom. I told him about the MS. How I wasn't sure if I'd be classified as a Terminal, and they were still debating whether to let Chronics come. How I'd tentatively looked into participating in the experiment, and my court-appointed "counselor" kept telling me it was tantamount to threatening suicide, and "flagging" my distress, and I didn't see any way he'd certify me as sane and rational enough to go, no matter what I said.

Leonard earned a BA during his twelve years in prison, plus a law degree. He walked me through the legal ins-and-outs of handling the shrink and the paperwork. Lots of emails and IM talks and picturephone talks . . . and then months of VR sex, and then I was able to go see him for real, and spend weekends with him. It's funny, 'cause there were years back when I was healthy when I was light-years away from finding a good guy.

The socialization sessions this afternoon were not "coed." The men had the big hall since they greatly outnumber us, and me and Carla, a zoologist who may be exaggerating the severity of her heart condition in order to get a look at whatever is going on in the Park, and Latasha, a woman who's been locked up for decades under, you guessed it, the Rockefeller drug laws, played hooky from our session. We hung out in a back room of the building, gossiping about the scientists in charge, and smoking. I don't smoke, but I figured I ought to, as part of our private little "socialization" activity. It felt nice and naughty in a junior high way.

Three more days of this. And then we're City-bound at last.

August 28, 2014

We're staying at the Plaza! Another life-long dream come true.

The frogmen (what we call the guys turning on the power in the designated buildings, 'cause you should see them in their rubber suits and gas masks) were still galumphing through the lobby as Leonard and I "checked in." We're taking ourselves up and down in the elevators, and we've got a room on the tenth floor with a beautiful view of the Park. I love the moldings and draperies and the old-fashioned-hotel stuffiness of the place, which I only know from reading *Eloise* as a kid. The view is cool, though the empty street is kind of creepy, especially as it grows dark. The Park is largely defoliated, but some trees have hung on. The pond has dried up. I rang for room service but, surprise surprise, nobody answered.

I can't quite believe I'm here. We came by ferry, a series of ferries, because the dirty bomb above Columbia made coming down via the GW Bridge a bad idea for however many decades. But the view of the Palisades as we rode over, and of the Manhattan skyline, was just spectacular. Water was churning beneath the ferry, and Leonard and I kept hugging each other, and I was jumping up and down like a kid. We had to walk all the way from the makeshift dock on the West Side to Central

Park South; these are the first buildings where the frogmen have switched on power for us. And they've got the water running in the bathrooms, though they want us only to drink the bottled water they ship in.

They're going to "turn on" a number of buildings on the East and West Side of the Park; they've painted huge, ugly Day-Glo orange marks on the ones they have powered up. I'm outraged. Have the beautiful buildings in this part of the City been preserved for a decade only to be defaced now? Why not just hang flags on those buildings? But the soulless twerps running the experiment did not consult me about their MO.

I don't want to stay forever on Central Park South. The abandoned carriages and horse skeletons, which I try not to see when I look out the window, are depressing. Leonard and I are gonna check out Central Park West tomorrow. We'll find a nice, homey apartment. Anything we find, we can keep: clothes, jewelry, furniture, gadgets, an apartment we like. We're beyond the laws of the healthy, normal people now, in Real America—the people who never believed in Manhattan anyway.

The frogmen deliver us nasty food in plastic envelopes, like something astronauts would have to eat. Devora, a big woman who has Sickle Cell, and a guy named Danny whose body is no longer responding to his drugs for HIV, are really good cooks, so they say, and they teamed up back at orientation (maybe before?). They're in the Plaza also (I keep my cell phone as close to me as Spot, and it knows all my friends' numbers) and they're looking into getting real, fresh food delivered, which they'll prepare and serve in the dining room. I'm not a bad cook; maybe I'll try to lend a hand . . .

September 1, 2014

According to Spot, my condition is not worsening. My left leg is a little numb, but that's par for the course with me. I'm having some hypochondriacal symptoms in my own mind—but those have been with me for years, from before the MS was diagnosed. This bastard disease took my mother and sister, and watching them die from it made me jumpy. But it's not gonna get in the way of my enjoying every minute of being home.

Danny's medpilot says his T cell count is dropping. But is that radiation or just a coincidence, since his condition has been deteriorating anyhow? A shortage of T cells is not exactly a problem for me. . . . The people the scientists will learn the most from are Rocky Drugsters like Leonard and Latasha; us sickos have too many things going on already to generate meaningful data. Leonard says he feels great. He's just so damned tickled to be out of jail, he acted like that dreary orientation week was a trip to the amusement park.

We're in a penthouse apartment on West 63rd at the moment. Maybe we'll make our way slowly uptown, as the weeks go by. These people had such ridiculously luxurious tastes, and everything is marble and Grecian, and I find it all kind of cold and depressing—reminds me of the honeymoon of my doomed early marriage, when we visited Pompeii.

But with this penthouse, you can walk all around on the outdoor roof garden patio thing, with the empty planters, and we can see some of the

devastation way uptown, and down in the Times Square area. Just charred blackness and buildings fallen in—I don't like to look for long. The Chrysler Building has lost a lot of its luster, though not all; it's blackened like old, old silver. And the Empire State Building is still there, and it's a mind-bending trip for me to look across the rooftops at it; I go up to the rail and peer at it for hours. On the other side I have a great view of Lincoln Center, which I wish the frogmen would light at night (maybe turn on the fountain? Make it festive!), and some nice tall buildings still standing at Columbus Circle. And of course, we've got a great view of the Park.

We ventured into the Park for the first time yesterday with Carla. She headed there first thing, first day—practically lives there. She says the insects have mostly vanished (and with them the spiders), but she has found several ant colonies that are doing well.

The squirrels all seem to be gone, just a few skeletons on the ground. We saw some large, light brown animals we thought might be bunnies in the tall, uncut bushes and grass, and got excited. But Carla tells us that they're all just rats, grown large and bold. Brrrrr. There are some migrating birds in the trees; a short spell here apparently doesn't doom them all. But where are the pigeons in the streets, and the roaches in the buildings? Along with the rats, those were the creatures that everybody thought would survive.

We made a sad trip over to the Central Park Zoo. The tanks had dried up, but through the crusting on the glass you could see polar bear skeletons inside, and seal skeletons in their open pool. Upsetting. We didn't go into the bird house or anything like that. We were startled, suddenly, when the clock struck. Went running over like children, to watch the animals spin around on the Delacorte Gate. I found myself crying and laughing, as the tinkly music box music played, and Leonard, who moved from Jamaica, West Indies, to Jamaica, Queens, twenty years ago and had never seen it before, put his arm around me. The hippo playing the violin has always been my favorite.

September 5, 2014

Leonard and I have moved again. We're in a homier, more modest place on West 72nd. Not the penthouse, but the view of the Park from the ninth floor is still nice. Jimmying the lock took a long time, but Leonard is good with tools, and he has the lock closing securely once again.

I'd never be a woman alone here. They gave us some self-defense classes during orientation, but they were kind of a joke, and yeah, I've got a gun in my purse, and there's a "black box" inside of Spot to record what happens to me if I press an alarm—but the threat of getting caught is not much of a deterrent for someone here who wants to lash out. We're not people who have much to lose, and if one of us turned violent and then wanted to get lost in the city—how hard would the frogmen try to pursue him? The women who came here alone or in couples strike me as really brave; I admire them, but I'm not sure I could have done it.

In theory, we've all been screened and we're all beautiful human beings who think like a community now. I actually think that's true of the ma-

jority of us, and plenty of the Rocky Drugsters are as gentle and nice as Leonard and Latasha and Chris and Brian and Nelson. But there's something a little depressing and unsettling about all these empty buildings, the empty hive of the City, I have to admit it—and the dark, tangled wilderness of the Park now. The whole place has a *Lord of the Flies* feel to it for me, whenever I'm walking outside without Leonard, even for a moment.

The people who lived here in 9-A had three little girls. Two of them shared bunk beds. I get the feeling they were two years apart in age, seven and five judging by the photos, and the parents actually gave them the biggest room. The baby's crib is in the parents' room. I'm not sure what they were planning to do when she was bigger—move her in with Tara and Claire, or section off part of the living room into a new room, or what? Claire has a lot of drawings in her desk, with her name scrawled in the lower corner. I hope they made it out okay, all of them, but the odds are pretty bad for the baby making it—I just mean statistically.

It's a little bit creepy poking through other people's lives and homes this way: all the dusty, once-hip appliances and trendy books and toys from the nineties and double zeros (these girls appear to have been heavily into Elmo, the little Muppet from *Sesame Street*), but I just keep telling myself that nobody wants this stuff back, it's tainted goods, *we're* tainted goods, we're performing a great experiment for Mankind and Our Country, and it's okay if we're nosy voyeurs and have fun while we do it.

The daddy's name was Steve Graham, and I'm noodling around with his blueberry colored iMac. It is so fucking *quaint,* and I used to have one like this in green, back in the day. Obviously, with equipment this old, we can't access a lot of what's on-line now. But the frogmen aren't gonna be bringing us new computers any time soon, and the *NYC Diaspora* and some other sites are creating special dumbed-down text versions we can access with this old equipment, out of solidarity with us brave guinea pigs here. It's a nice gesture, though I don't feel a need to read the *Diaspora* now that I'm back . . . some of us are writing for them, of course, and negotiating book deals. It's good the ex-prisoners can line up a future, in case they want to split in a year or so, with their sentences commuted . . . for us sickos, I don't think it matters. Our participants' fees and the fees for these diaries should be more than we need. But then—some people do have families to send money to.

I've gone over this place with a Dustbuster (remember them?) and it feels less like we're living in a museum now. The dust may be radiation-heavy; I was glad to see it go.

We're gonna walk downtown and have dinner at the Plaza again tonight. Or maybe take a quikcart—the little go-cart things the frogmen have set out for us to get around in. Danny and Devora and Yves and Raul definitely do *not* need help from the likes of me, when it comes to preparing food. They've had training as professional chefs. We promise them "credits" for food—that seems to be the barter system that's shaping up. They prepare fabulous meals, and we promise part of our future participants' fees for them or their families in two years' time. They keep track of who owes what on a palmpad. I guess it beats shells or beads.

Last night, we had coq au vin. I bet this is the best food the Plaza has

ever served. They're training people to serve up spicier stuff at Harry Cipriani's at the Sherry-Netherland across the way, but I'm not up for it.

September 6, 2014

This has been a really fun day!

At dinner last night, a lot of people were talking about the stores, especially on Fifth Avenue, and how the frogmen and the scientists can't be bothered about them. Turns out some of these folks are engineers and architecture buffs (that's partly why they're here) and they know how to power up the buildings' emergency generators. So, we gathered at the Plaza at nine this morning, and we started with FAO Schwarz. They didn't have the escalators running, but the lights were on, and we played and played, and practically trashed the place. Boy, some of those stuffed animals are *huge,* and, when you bang the dust off them, very appealing. A lot of the electronic and battery-operated trains and proto-robotic toys still work. There were nearly a hundred of us clambering through the store. Leonard helped himself to five different kinds of Lego—he's in Tara and Claire's room now, building a battleship.

I wandered into a sort of a shrine to Barbie—and just stood there, transfixed. What the hell is it about Barbie? They had her in old movie costumes, and wearing those Double Zero fashions, like low-rider jeans and retro-1970s stuff. They had her dressed for every profession, and with various buddies—and there were dolls of Britney Spears when she was younger. I walked out with an armload of Barbies of the world, and a Marie Antoinette and a Cleopatra Barbie, and a Dorothy and a Scarlett O'Hara, and a few generics . . . now what do I *do* with them? The normal ones are the most fun; I've been dressing them up in various outfits. Leonard says we're permanent blackout looters now, and I guess that's so.

Anyhow, we all met again, in our quikcarts, on Fifth Avenue in the afternoon, and started to do some hard-core exploring. We went to Tiffany's. You'd be surprised how much stuff was left there, though it can't be *that* tainted and dangerous. Can it? Leonard was nervous about touching it—he can't shake the feeling they're gonna take back what they said about us being free to touch everything, take anything. He does *not* want to go back to jail! But most of us were less restrained, and a lot of glass cases got bashed open. If people can figure out how to sell this stuff outside (a no-no) there are gonna be some very rich spouses and grandchildren out there. I settled for some emerald and diamond earrings, a silver and onyx salamander brooch, and a beautiful Fabergé egg with a set of tiny Russian dolls, fitting into each other, inside. I have simple tastes.

Tomorrow, we're gonna do Saks and Bloomies. Well, we're pioneers after all, we're explorers, and it's high time we started pushing back the edges of the frontier!

September 7, 2014

I didn't spend much time in Saks. I took some lingerie, a beaded gown, and some scarves. It was winter when the dbombs hit, and that's the kind of clothes they were showing, and the weather is still mild now; those heavier clothes on the racks seemed wrong.

And I'm not feeling so hot. Spot is recording some ominous readings, though the scientists are probably making better sense of them than I am. Numbness in my left leg is making me walk funny, and my right hand is doing its claw/spastic routine, and God, how I *hate* that! I haven't had it since I went into remission, and I surely did not miss it. Leonard is great, but I don't want to eat with the others, don't want to be seen. I gave Bloomie's a miss altogether.

Plus, I feel nauseous. And that's not the MS; that may be a reaction to whatever vestigial radiation there is around here. I haven't compared notes with the others. I wonder if I'm the only one? What will they do if the experiment is a success, if those who came here healthy like Leonard do okay, or reasonably okay? Will they let the people who lost everything come back in? Will some people have to give back their refugee compensation from ten years ago, if their stuff is still intact? (Mine isn't, probably. My co-op was too near the Times Square dbomb; they've forbidden me to go back and take a look.) Will they let poor people from across the country have the best housing in Manhattan mega cheap, or ship a lot of homeless people here, or what?

I spent some time this afternoon hanging out with Lillian. She's a woman in her sixties, and she's staying in our building. She had an apartment at 92nd and Broadway, inherited from her grandmother, and she's impatient to get into it, but they won't turn on the power in that building, she can't figure out how to get the elevator working on her own . . . She's thinking of bailing out of Manhattan.

She had an upsetting experience in a building on CPW and 85th a few days ago. She went to claim an apartment—and found human remains. Some elderly person who disobeyed the evacuation order, apparently, or couldn't bear to leave her cats (skeletons everywhere) or felt too weak to go. She's still upset by that; Leonard had to go all through her apartment across the hall from us before she would enter it. I'm trying not to think like her, trying not to let the car shells on the streets and the quiet, and the darkness at night, and the animal skeletons, and—*all* of it—get to me. I'm home, and that's what's important. I'd rather be here than in Des Moines.

But Lillian showed me a New York *Times* she found in that old lady's apartment, from the day of the dbombs. Cautious headlines—and reckless statements from the swaggering, dimbulb politicos who took control during the Double Zero years: as destructive and intolerant and pious in their own way as the fundamentalist loonies were abroad—and meanwhile, articles about snow sculptures in the Park, and a review for a new show for kids opening at Rockefeller Center. . . . Creepy.

But I hope she doesn't decide to leave. I can't leave. I've committed to this, me and Leonard. He's not going back to prison, and I'm not going back to Des Moines. I wasn't even here on dBomb Day; I was visiting a college friend upstate. We saw it happen on CNN. The pandemonium after the first one hit; and then we could hear the explosions and screams in the background, during the broadcast, as the other two went off. . . . I had left my husband three years earlier, because his idea of heaven was a house in Glen Cove, Long Island: beautiful, but it seemed a lot of our

neighbors were rich and rude and empty-headed, doing the suburban thing and consuming designer drugs daily that poor Rocky Drugsters like Leonard have never even heard of . . . not for me. The lawns were just too well-manicured. I needed people walking around at night.

I needed the grit and bustle of the City, and my husband had no time for my needs, so I took off, and sank all my savings into a co-op just above Murray Hill, and I was seeing a guy named Mike who taught film history at the New School, and I was temping and going back to school and actually feeling pretty good about my life—and then, suddenly—nothing. I don't know where Mike was that day, but he was not teaching and he did not make it out alive. My dog Betty, a neighbor was watching her—gone. The neighbor—gone. All my friends, my only cousin and her kids, everything I own, everything that mattered to me, my City—gone.

I went where they sent me. Des Moines was what I hit in the refugee re-settlement lottery. So I went, because nothing mattered, and then when the MS started, I needed to be where they told me to be in order to get funds to see a doctor. I don't talk with an Iowa accent, but I can if I want to, if I want to blend in and not be known at once for the refugee I am. If they don't know you're from New York, you get to hear what they *really* think. What they felt at first, the rest of the country, was great pity and then—a quiet sense that we had had it coming, 'cause we were Sodom and Gomorrah, and that's what the Bible says should happen. And why did we tempt fate and continue to live there after 9/11/01?

In recent years, they've gotten more flip about the whole thing.

Q: How do you make New York-style pizza?

A: Pour the tomato sauce and cheese on the dough, and leave it outside.

Or, here's another one:

Q: How many New Yorkers does it take to change a lightbulb?

A: None. New Yorkers don't need lightbulbs; they glow in the dark.

That's about the level of the humor you'll hear if you hang out in a Midwestern bar these days. And if you do let people know you're from NYC, out in Real America, they try to be kind and sympathetic, but they draw away from you, like maybe they'll get radiation sickness just from standing near you.

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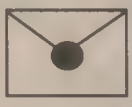

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So, I withdrew into myself, I could barely bring myself to temp, I sure couldn't date or "make new friends," I had the survivor guilt going on, and some darkness and bitterness that had not even hit me when I lost Mom or my sister Alice. I was damned if I saw the point to any of it, and when the MS showed up, it gave me even more of an excuse to feel that way.

If I get sicker, then so be it. But I'm *not* going back out there. I'm staying right here inside the Baked Apple, where I belong.

September 8, 2014

I slept a long time and woke up feeling stronger. First thing I did was call Miles, one of the guys who powered up Saks and the other stores, and get him to come over to turn on the power in Lillian's building, so she can go home for real. She's very excited, and maybe she'll stay now. I'll miss her on the hall, but I'm hopeful that this will keep her from bailing out of the experiment.

I went to Bloomie's, and took some silk blouses and cashmere sweaters—not that I need them with the weather the way it is now, but I've always loved cashmere—and a couple of Liz Claiborne skirts, and a Prada bag. I remember them.

I didn't feel up to going downtown on the expedition to the Village. But my hand was behaving itself, I wasn't self-conscious, and we had dinner with everybody at the Plaza tonight. Other people's medpilots are recording symptoms, and it turns out that Leonard is nauseous too. And like me, he's not gonna budge. We spent the evening at the Museum of Natural History. It's such a weird shrine to Teddy Roosevelt, the whole museum is a museum piece, I'm very fond of it. I enjoy the old dioramas and the stuffed animals. I kind of felt like I was inside a museum inside a museum (the City) and fought the feeling. But the Planetarium was glorious.

The people who went to the Village took their quikcarts all the way over on the East Side Highway, so as not to pass through midtown. They say the old UN building looked beautiful, better than that new, tall, needly thing in Geneva. I believe it. The scientists told them they weren't allowed to go below Houston Street, but they said some of the trees in Washington Square Park are still alive, and it looked pretty, and recognizable. They brought back Village knick-knacks as trophies: rude slogan T-shirts, and boots, and spiky collars.

Two people swear they saw humans watching them, and then disappearing down Thompson Street and onto Houston. Dark, shaggy men, very dirty (well, what the hell could they have been doing for fresh water, all this time?). The idea that anyone stayed, avoided the evacuation, and survived all this time is pretty amazing. Terrifying and thrilling, both. But these guys spoke like they'd had a sighting of wild animals, and wouldn't want to get any closer. I don't think they were making it up.

And a couple of people I don't like, who were making fun of the rest of us as cowards for not venturing downtown, got chased by wild dogs that were foaming at the mouth and covered with sores. Good.

There's a dance at the Plaza tomorrow night. We've all got ball gowns and tuxes and Cartier watches to show off now. But I don't know if I'm going to be up for it.

September 11, 2014

I've been too low to write the last few days. Freaked out and furious over Carla's murder. After they found her body in the Park, the dance was canceled. Lillian came and found me and said she was leaving. The frogmen won't turn the water back on in her building, and Miles can't help with that, so she can't live there. She's upset about Carla, and she's taking some personal possessions with her that only mildly perturb the Geiger counter, and she's gonna go live with her son and his unpleasant wife in Detroit, until the cancer in her bones takes her.

The rest of the world will hear about Carla, and think: well, that's what New Yorkers are like. Of *course* there's crime, murder, since there are people living there again! And that's *not* what we're like! Most of the people I know here. We do stay in touch, we *are* forming a community. But maybe some crazy, somewhere among us, did this? Or could there really be Wild Men in the Park, like the ones people saw in Greenwich Village? Are we glancing at each other uneasily for nothing?

She wasn't raped, no one took anything from her, she was simply clubbed, from behind, so fast she couldn't even activate the alarm and black box in her medpilot. So, we'll probably never know what happened.

I'm having dizziness, and I don't even know if it's from radiation or my MS getting worse. There's a ceremony going on over at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Miles and his geek buddies powered it up, to commemorate what happened on this day thirteen years ago. The Wall Street dbomb was the messiest, and so of course no one's trying to head to the old Ground Zero. All over the country they're observing today as a holiday, and wearing their little flags, like they do on dBomb Day, and saying how Everything Changed and they'll Never Forget. But it's just a nervous tic for them, a superstition like not stepping on the cracks. They've forgotten already.

I've been looking at crayon drawings in Claire's desk. Her parents and sisters. Her teacher, Mrs. Marinetti. A class trip to the Planetarium. That upset me because we just went, and the red glowing spot on Spot is looking to me like the angry red spot on Jupiter, and, as always, I wonder if my thoughts are growing jumbled due to MS and will I have memory loss, or is it radiation, or am I just cracking up. . . ? I talked to Leonard, and we're gonna get out of here.

September 15, 2014

We're on the East Side now, in a penthouse at East 89th. There's a lovely view of the Park, and the water in the reservoir looks pretty.

This place doesn't have the cold, stony feel of the first penthouse—but it doesn't oppress us as much with the sense of lives interrupted as living in the Grahams' place did. It seems to have belonged to a free-wheeling yuppie couple, no kids. Leonard is having a lot of fun with the CD collection—turning himself and me on to lots of indie rock from the dbomb era, as well as showtunes and jazz we don't know enough about.

Leonard found a huge baggie of pot, plus rolling papers, in the guy's desk drawer. That's why Leonard was convicted originally: he came over

from the Island with a few connections and a recreational interest in ganja. He'd get some for friends sometimes, and sometimes score people some coke—and they sentenced him to thirty years for being a drug dealer. He was on Riker's Island when the riots happened, and they slapped another five years on his sentence, and shipped him up to Sing Sing. Well, at least it got him away from the dbomb downwind, which is all the rioters wanted—and he says he kept some wilder guys from acting out; he himself did not hurt anyone.

You'd think they'd commute the sentences of Rocky Drugsters, now that the laws have been repealed. But then, I guess, they wouldn't have as many potential recruits for this experiment. . . .

Anyhow, Leonard keeps complaining about how stale this marijuana is, but it's a decade old, what do you want, and he's right—it does help us with the nausea. We haven't been dining at the Plaza or the Sherry-Netherland much; this place has an electric stove, and a spice rack, and I've stocked up the fridge with the frogmen's food baggies, and some fresh ingredients that we've gotten them to distribute (to us, not just the hotel dining rooms!) and I've been preparing food less conducive to queasiness, so that helps also.

My hand is acting up, and I shouldn't be self-conscious, but I am. But we've decided we're going to the weekend dance, no matter what. We've got some pretty fabulous stuff to wear. Our big outing yesterday was a trip to the Met. The frogmen have been overheard discussing removing some of the art. They had better not try. This is *our* City now, and that art belongs to us. There's a volunteer watchgroup forming, among the bigger guys, to keep any of us from walking off with Van Goghs and Monets and such. (Would someone really be stupid enough to try to sell them on the Black Market?) Maybe they can keep the scientists' frogmen out as well.

Tonight was lovely, just staying in, with Leonard playing a CD of Ella Fitzgerald singing Rodgers and Hart. We tried on our finery (I've got a blue gown of watered silk that I found in a closet here, and Leonard looks pretty sharp in his tux), and we danced on the penthouse balcony. People turn on lots of lights at night now, along the Park. Not just in the apartments they're staying in; it's more cheerful to see lights all over. They were reflected in the water of the reservoir, and so was the moon. There's the faintest breeze now, but it still doesn't feel like autumn. Ella's voice was silken, singing about a cozy flat in old Manhattan, and I just lost myself in the loveliness of where we are living.

The lights really make it feel like we're home, like the City is not just an empty coral reef with all the organisms dead. Leonard has that rich, rolling laugh of an island man, and he laughed my anxieties away.

There are cashmere blankets in this joint. I almost wish it was cooler, so we could snuggle under them. But I've got to stop hoping for some other moment, and just enjoy the moments we have right now. Tonight was sweet, beautiful, and I give thanks for it.

I leaned my head into his chest and shoulder, and he didn't spin me, for fear of dizziness, he just rocked me in his arms, in the moonlight, for a long time. I felt the City was real, and living again, and we were floating above it. We've turned Manhattan back into an isle of joy. ❍

POSTCARDS

Fifty years from now
there will be miles wide
telescopes orbiting the sun
collecting light from
distant planets we don't
even know exist yet.

Fifty years from now
we'll see some aliens looking up
and waving at us
wondering what kind
of people we are
and have been.

Fifty years from now
other worlds
will be more familiar than
our next door neighbors
or our relatives
living in a distant city.

—Mario Milosevic

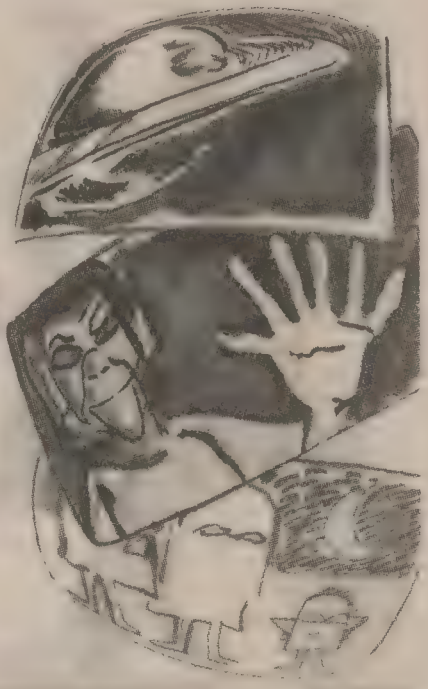

Illustration by June Levine

TRACKER

Mary Rosenblum

Mary Rosenblum is the author of three science fiction novels and four mysteries (as Mary Freeman). She's currently working on a novel that is set off planet—a first for her! M. Rosenblum's latest story continues a world that she began with "Flight" way back in our February 1985 issue. Knowledge of the earlier tale is not at all necessary for enjoying this new story.

The City Man was calling him.

Tracker lifted his head from his garden, distracted from the small fears and satisfactions of the black beetles sucking juice from the ruffled cabbages beneath his fingers. The scent of that calling came to him on the soft westerly winds that also carried molecules of ocean, fish, and seagull shit, dying shelled-things, and hungry water-living mammals. It blew across City, too, and the scents it carried from that place bore images, but few names, to Tracker's mind. Only City Man's calling carried a name.

But City Man was not really a name. His name was a complex of scent and touch, of not touching, tone of voice, and the small sharp veerings of emotion—a thread that strung Tracker's days and nights and more days of remembered history into a contiguous thread.

City Man had created Tracker.

Jesse whined, and nudged his leg with her nose, her canine eyes on his face. She couldn't hear City Man's calling, but she knew that Tracker heard him, because her engineered brain let her know. Since she stared at him, he saw himself briefly through her eyes, a long face with planes and slopes like the cliff faces above the cove beach, his hair the tawny red of the clay soil beneath the winter rains. He caught a glimpse of his cabbages, fat and green and round at the edges of her vision. Their smooth green roundness filled him brief satisfaction. These were old genes, unaltered, the same cabbages an old-days human might have grown, a thousand years ago, when their genes were equally innocent.

Jesse nudged him again. Conscience. Friend. Eyes.

"All right," he said aloud. "Let's find out what he wants." He put out his hand, felt the hair-warmth-duty of her presence come up against his palm. She showed him the dirt path between the irregular boundaries of his garden beds with her sight, tugged him along with her silent urgency.

"He's only going to want to play," he said to her gruffly. "Show off one of his little creations."

Jesse didn't answer, marching firmly along, showing him the path she knew that he should take. She was good at that—keeping his feet from stumbling. Tracker felt a birdwing shadow of fear and thought back quickly. How old was she? City Man had made her for him, and he had no idea what lifespan he had built into her genes. Had never thought to ask. His step faltered, as he contemplated the cabbages and old-days plants with lost names, swept by her eyes. Smelled earth, and the tickling lifethought of small squirming things. His world.

She nipped at him. Impatient.

"Coming." Beyond the tall wall of his garden, City waited. He gathered his senses tightly into himself as he absently admired the paving of white marble inlaid with abstract patterns of green jasper and blue lapis in front of Jesse's paws. Too bright, he thought, but that would change, as soon as one of the City got bored. For awhile—years or decades—it had been paved in mother of pearl. He had liked that, liked the subtle opalescent gleam that Jesse had showed him and the memory-song of the shells that had once held life. They walked a lot then. It had been a cloudy cool time, before someone turned up the sun. They passed a few folk on the wide street, but no City people. You rarely saw City people. Few that they were, they didn't spend much time in City unless someone had made it new. No one had made it new for some time now.

They reached the City Man's gate. Jesse would never look wholly at it. She looked aside, studying the thin-sliced agate that tiled the wall. He knew the gate by its feel beneath his palms. It was made of bones. He wasn't sure whose bones they were, but they were delicate—a flying creature. They murmured to him of wind as a solid living thing as he pushed the gate open.

He was right. City Man had a visitor. Woman, he smelled, hormones in balance, full of life, unshadowed by death. He could always smell it—that lack of Death's shadow. It shaded all the City creations, a hint of darkness on a sunny day. Not so, for City's Residents. Death could not shadow them. They summoned it only at will, their servant, no master. Jesse wouldn't look at the Woman or at City Man, so he stood still, admiring the raked sand and small perfect shells that she showed him. It occurred to him that he had never really looked at City Man. Jesse wouldn't do it.

"Of course, he's blind," City Man was saying to the Woman. "He doesn't need eyes. If I asked him to find you, he would feel you on the far side of the planet. Or on the orbital. On the Moon Garden. He's that aware."

"Oh, you're so sure you're the top Creator in the solar system." The Woman sounded bored, but it was an act. He could feel her interest prickling his skin, mixed with a sharp edge of jealousy. Tracker studied the tight spiral of a shell the color of a rainy morning. A creature had made that, without thought or intent. City Man had made a tribe of men and women who built endless sand sculptures on the beach below his garden—sculptures that the tide daily washed away. Like the shell maker.

Slowly, he realized that the Woman had left the garden and that City Man was contemplating him. Jesse was leaning against his knee, wanting hard to be gone.

"Tracker." City Man came close enough that the clove and sweat-scent of him, and that hard clean lack of Death's shadow, filled Tracker's senses.

"I want you to find someone." He put a hand on Tracker's shoulder.

Jesse flinched.

"One of my creations. She ran away once before, and I found her. This time . . . I don't feel like going. I have better things to do."

The jagged edge of his lie brushed Tracker's mind, and he stifled a wince. Jesse growled, so low and soft that City Man didn't hear her. Tracker put a hand down on her silken head. Shushed her.

"Here she is." He moved away. Something rustled, and then City Man thrust a spider-silk bag against Tracker's chest.

He took it, felt softness and small bits of hardness within the folds of silk.

"She probably went to find the kite flyers again." Burning like bee stings filled his words. "She stayed with them a long time, last time. Go find her." He turned away, his scent and presence diminishing. "She's mine, and I want her back, Tracker."

Jesse nudged at him, panting with eagerness to be gone from this place. He wound his fingers in her silky coat, feeling her fear. "Why are you afraid?" he asked her softly as she pulled him through the bone-barred gate and back out into City's white marble and lapis. "He won't hurt you. He doesn't care."

Jesse licked his hand, and then—deliberately—nipped the soft pad of flesh between his thumb and forefinger.

Tracker sucked in his breath at the sting of pain, pressed his hand to his mouth, tasting the coppery note of blood on his tongue.

Twilight shrouded the fat cabbages with their innocent genes by the time he and Jesse reached the garden. They went inside and he told Jesse to go play. He didn't need her here. His house existed as scents of comfort, curving walls, cushions and tables that held his echo and Jesse's, static and welcoming. He crossed the thick carpet to run his hands along a sculpture of wave-polished wood, crafted by a young man who helped carve the sand sculptures that the waves erased with each tide.

Mindless and innocent, like the shell maker.

He fingered the complex twine of wood with polished wood and shook his head, frowning. Then he sat at his table with its not-quite-satiny grain and opened the slick folds of spider silk. It held a rumpled wad of fabric. He lifted it to his face, inhaling the scents of dust, wind, and longing. A picture flickered in his mind—a melon-colored kite diving through a cloudless sky. *She probably went to find the kite flyers again.* The small hard things were freshwater pearls, lumpy and irregular, that filled his mind with the timeless passage of slow watery days. Gold wires had been threaded through them, as if they had been used for earrings once. The nip on his hand had scabbed over, and he touched the grainy roughness of scab, wondering what had upset Jesse. After awhile, he got up and went out into the garden, to harvest lettuce, leaf by crisp leaf, and pull tiny sweet carrots from the loose soil. He ended beside his trellis of peas, face to the gentle breeze that was blowing fish scent and the evening-smoke

of the sand sculptors in from the shore. Each carrot root and tiny sphere of pea-germ was a small death. Tracker tossed the last empty pod into the compost bin at the edge of the garden. Life lived on death, he thought. Until City and the people who lived here came to be.

They had defied Death.

The cooking fires on the beach were burning out. The distant scent of orcas came to Tracker. They were playing out in the dark bay, not hungry right now, just playing. He went into his house, comforted by the familiar textures and contours, and lay down on the cushions in the corner. After a few minutes, Jesse crept in beside him. She licked his hand where she had nipped it, turned around twice, and lay down with a sigh.

They left City in the morning, walking face-on into the warmth of the rising sun. Jesse frisked like a puppy. The land outside City's walls was desert. That surprised Tracker a little. It had been prairie last time he had been out here, full of flowers. How long ago? He tried to fix the time, gave up. Someone had decided that the land should be desert so . . . it was desert. One of City's residents sculpted the land with glaciers. Tracker remembered City Man saying so.

They had time to sculpt a landscape with glaciers.

Away from the shore, the wind blew hot from the center of the land, and Tracker lifted his head, his hand on Jesse's head, not bothering to look through her eyes. He could taste her. The one City Man wanted. Out there. The melon-colored kite dove and rose in the cloudless sky, and he scented that hint of dust and longing, mingled with . . . joy.

They walked, living off the dried vegetables and meat in his pack, sleeping in the hottest part of the day, walking beneath the waxing moon. One of City's members had sculpted the face of the moon. Dark lines and spaces crossed it, Tracker saw, as Jesse raised her nose to howl at it; stark against its white disk, a stain of crimson spread like a tortured rose near the center. He wondered who had made that stain.

On the morning after the full moon, on the day they shared the last of their water, they found her.

Her scent had been strong in his face all night, and an eager restlessness kept him striding on through the darkness, patient Jesse uncomplaining at his side. He stumbled on rocks, sometimes, and fell once, but he didn't care. The wind was soft now, a desert breath against his face, stoking his cheeks like gentle fingers.

In the first faint warmth of morning, he halted. Ahead, he sensed life, bright with flesh scent and laughter, and the joy of being alive in the warmth of a new day. The kiters. It must be. Then, Jesse looked, and saw the bright greens and blues, yellows and oranges of the kites as they soared and spiraled into the bright air, forming tightly only to break apart into explosions of color and reform once more, tails writing cryptic glyphs against the sky. A single melon-colored kite soared suddenly, briefly, circling the twined and ordered mass of the kites, a rogue dancing to its own tune.

She was there.

Tracker let his breath out slowly, and, as if it had heard him, the kite

veered suddenly, soaring away from the dancing spiral, straining toward him briefly before it settled lightly to earth.

Tracker slung the near-empty pack over his shoulder and strode forward. Jesse took her place at his side, her eyes showing him the rocks and scrub and small scuttling insects in front of them. He wanted her to look up again, to watch the kites, but she kept her eyes stubbornly on the ground. Then, abruptly, she stopped, and finally, she looked up. Tracker looked with her eyes, ready to see *her,* the melon kite in her hands, smelling of dust and longing.

It shocked him a little, as Jesse's vision showed him his quarry. Golden hair tumbled around her face, and over her shoulders. Her eyes, the color of spring grass, laughed at him, and she smiled, the kite in her hands, the curves of her body hidden by a loose shift of kite-fabric. Two polished horns sprang from her temples, curving gracefully to deadly points. Two more horns, smaller, also curved, sprang one from each hip. The shift had slitted sides so that the curved spurs could protrude, and the hemmed edges revealed a flash of tanned and muscular thigh. She smiled, and the laughter in her eyes was familiar, as if they were old friends.

"I've been waiting for you," she said, and held out one slender hand.

He took it. Jesse growled and fixed her eyes on the woman's leg, as if contemplating a bite. "Quiet." Tracker no longer needed her eyes. The woman's presence filled his senses so that vision would have been a distraction only. Life, he thought absently. She was life itself, a flame of vitality that radiated energy into the universe around her like a burning fire. Her fingers curved around his, *holding* his hand in a way that defined the casual phrase, as aware of the texture of his flesh, the tension of his bones, and the pulse of blood and neural synapses, as he was.

She was so aware.

It disturbed him that City Man had made her, good though he was.

Jesse growled again, softly, uncertainty shivering through her.

"My name is Yolanda." Her voice was low, and as intimate as if they were lying side by side in a tumbled bed. "Donai sent you."

He nodded, comprehending that "Donai" was her name for the City Man, attuned for her reaction. Anger, fear, flight, attack?

She laughed again, and he felt only sadness woven with silver threads of amusement. And . . . love. "He came himself, last time. But Donai never does anything the same way twice."

Jesse growled again, sharply this time, pressing forward between them, her head forward, ears pricked. Tracker realized that the kiters had come, forming a shifting vortex of curiosity, hostility, and fear around them. Jesse's eyes roved from form to form, tension knotting her body as they drew closer, reading threat in their wary stares. He put his hand on her, not bothering to look, because he didn't need to see their faces. She quieted instantly, but her tension shivered through the skin of his palm and up his arm.

"Stranger." One came close, radiating vitality and health, although the shadow of Death suggested that he was not young. Jesse tensed, attack hormones torturing her. "I am Karin." He was the source of the hostility Tracker had scented, although it was under tight control. "This is Sairee,"

his tone indicated gesture. "She is Mayor. I am Center. We would like to know what we can do for you?"

They knew. Tracker kept his restraining hand on Jesse's shoulders as he bowed slightly. "I came to speak with . . . Yolanda." It impressed them that he told the truth. Certainly the Center—whatever that was—Karin, expected him to lie, and Tracker's small truth cracked his armor of hostility. Roiling tensions seeped through the cracks. "You have been in City," he said.

"Yes." The Center's sweat went acrid with suspicion. "If Yolanda wishes to speak with you, she may," he said flatly. "If she wishes to go with you she may. If she does not, she will stay. Is your dog going to attack? She wants to."

"She is only afraid that you threaten me." Tracker stroked Jesse's head, impressed again by this creation's awareness. "She only wants to protect me."

"There are wild dog packs out here. They kill straying humans. I wonder where they came from."

The Center was staring at his face. Tracker felt the pressure of his eyes, shrugged. "They were created," he said. "As you were. And I. And Yolanda. I don't know why they were put here."

For a moment, everyone was silent. Then a hand touched his arm, and Jesse whined with his flinch. A soft gray presence, a woman heavy with knowledge and authority, stood close to him. "Come have water," she said. "And food. The flight wind is past, and it's time to eat." She took his hand, and Tracker felt an odd sense of déjà vu, as if this had happened before. She tugged him forward—guiding him, he realized with a small twinge of surprise. She had guessed that he was blind. He let her steer him around the scrubby tufts of thorn and ancient, worn stones. As Jesse fell reluctantly in at his heel—still growling—he realized that the sense of déjà vu was *hers,* not his.

She had done this before, and the memory was so strong in her that, for an instant, a circle of vans wavered into being in his mind's eye. Once, long ago, this woman had led Yolanda down to the vans, he realized.

They crested a low ridge and moved slowly down into a wide flat channel that faintly remembered long-gone flowing water. A dusty scent of slow-living plants and small furry and scaled lives colored the wind. Jesse showed him a circle of colorful wooden vans, topped by canopies of neon bright kite fabric. Sails, he thought. The roof could be raised to the wind, to drive the vans. Carvings of leaves and kite shapes decorated the painted sides. A cluster of small, wiry children watched from the shadow of the vans, their curiosity a brightness pricking at his senses. None of them were older than ten or eleven, Tracker guessed, and wondered where the older children were. Everyone scattered to a van, in small groups of three or four, stooping to greet the children who ran to them, glancing over their shoulders at Tracker and Jesse. They did not point, Tracker noticed. One did not point, among this tribe of creations. The Center, Karin, had joined them, his hostility a low simmer now, as the woman guided Tracker toward a yellow van with a green and orange canopy/sail.

He gestured to Jesse to remain outside, and felt his way up the broad steps and into the close, life-scented interior. He felt a bench beneath his groping hands, eased himself onto it. It felt good to sit like this. The edge of a table or counter brushed his arm and he listened to the disciplined choreography of the three creations moving within the confined space. They had shared this space for a long time to move with such comfort. Small thumps told of containers being set onto the table top beside him. He smelled water and cooking food. He groped for them, aware of the man, Karin's, sudden intense scrutiny, closed his hand around an earthenware mug full of sweet water. He drained it, thirsty.

"You are blind?" Karin's surprise brightened the space.

"The dog is his eyes." Yolanda's voice, rich with certainty.

"Is that true?" Sairee, concerned. "You can bring it in here."

Tracker shook his head. "It's not important." The van's interior was taking shape around him, the dimensions defined by scent, the bounce of sound, pockets of stagnant air, and the casual movements of the three. Bed over there and another above. Food space beyond where he sat. All else would be cupboards for storage. He felt a finely crafted cabinet door behind his legs. The kiters had skill with wood, too. Sairee pushed an earthenware bowl gently into his hands. He found a carved wooden spoon, scooped up some kind of cooked grain, sweetened with berries that tasted of summer sun. For a time, they ate silently, the sound of spoon against bowl and the warm comfort of swallowed food filling the van. Tracker finished the grain and set the bowl down on the table.

"You understand that if Yolanda doesn't want to go back with you, you can't force her." Karin spoke immediately, as if he had been waiting for Tracker to finish, his voice edged with challenge and threat.

He had been in love with her. Tracker tilted his head, savoring the subtle play of chemical conversation. Not any more, but the echo was there, a duet with Sairee's gentle sadness. She knew that Yolanda would choose to leave, he thought. As she had known immediately that he was blind. Aware, these creations, yes. Very.

"I'm going to go with him." The air rippled as Yolanda reached to touch Karin. "It's time."

Karin didn't speak, but the air moved with his abrupt gesture of denial. Sairee said nothing, but her sadness deepened. Tracker expected Karin to argue and protest, but it was Sairee who spoke, thoughtful. "How does your dog see for you?"

Tracker frowned, wondering what would make sense to these people with their kites and carved wood. "City Man engineered her," he said slowly. "He changed the part of her brain that sees. It talks to me."

A small hot brightness woke in Sairee, like a tiny bright flower unfolding. "You know about City tech," she said. "Is there a . . . disease that kills children?"

Tracker frowned, feeling the depth of their listening, and the bright desperate flower of Sairee's hope.

"I mean . . . our children have begun to die. By their thirteenth summer. You saw them outside. It's a sickness. Maybe City people know how to cure it."

"Hush, Sairee." Karin's voice was rough and hard with old anger. "They wouldn't share a cure with us anyway."

How to say to these people that disease did not exist, not even out here? "I'm sorry," Tracker said at last. "I don't know."

"Ah well." The hope flower withered, leaving grayness in its wake. "I'm sorry."

Tracker felt the stir of her rising. "We'll let you rest, stranger." She paused for an instant. "Will you share your name with us?"

Names were important here. "Tracker," he said and felt their instant of hesitation. "That is my name," he said.

They didn't believe him, but they were polite about it and left, taking Sairee's grief and Karin's anger with them. He turned to face Yolanda, feeling the glow of her like sunlight on his flesh.

"These are gentle people, Tracker." Yolanda touched his face with her fingertips. "Someone created them to be finite, and this is how they are ending."

"City Man—Donai—created them."

She took her fingers away, her sudden anger like the flick of a sharp nail against his cheek. "How do you know that?"

He shrugged, because the silver music of their origin was written in their scent. "I just do."

"He never told me that. I don't believe you."

She was lying, and angry grief edged the lie. Tracker shrugged and stood. He went outside to the nervously waiting Jesse and squatted beside her, squeezing one silken ear, sorry for her anxiety. She thumped her tail and licked his face, telling him it was okay, even though it wasn't. Climbing back into the van, he followed water-scent to a clay pitcher and returned to fill her small bowl and open a package of dried meat from his pack for her.

"Welcome to The Caravan." One of the children, a bright flare of life and youthful joy-in-living, squatted beside him, earning a wary stare from Jesse. Her eyes showed him red hair and freckles, and long legs like a horse-colt. "Did you have something to eat and drink?" she asked with a grownup reserve and a carefully restrained impatience that suggested the words were important custom.

Tracker nodded as he set the full water bowl down for Jesse. "Thank you."

"Are you really from City?" Social necessity taken care of, the words burst forth, gleaming silver with curiosity. "What's it like? Are there really all kinds of weird monsters there? And are the streets really paved with gems and polished agate? What is so awful there that Karin won't talk about it?"

Tracker smiled, amused at the girl's burning enthusiasm. "I don't know why your Center won't talk about it."

"Silly not to." The girl made a face. "It just makes me wonder about it more than if he told me everything."

Wise child. Tracker smiled. "My name is Tracker."

"Is that really a name?" Doubting.

"I don't have any other." He poured the dried meat out for Jesse. The

girl burned like Yolanda, in a different way. Like a spring sun versus a summer sun, he thought.

She had been considering his statement. "My name is Karda." She had decided he was telling the truth.

Karin's daughter. Tracker scented it. And Sairee's? "Do you want to go see City?" he asked, his hand on Jesse's silken coat.

"Yes." Her nod stirred the air. "Just to see why Karin won't say anything. It can't be that horrible. But I don't think I want to live there." Thoughtful. "I like this life. What does City have? I mean, all those people stuck in one place. Do they Fly?"

She meant kites. Tracker shrugged. "Perhaps some. I've never heard of it, but anything can be done." People with millennia to live did everything eventually.

"Are you going to take Yolanda away?" Hard tone this time, warning him that she didn't want to be lied to.

"She chooses to come with me."

The girl's sudden stabbing grief surprised him. He turned toward her, but Jesse's attention was on her food, so he groped toward her spring-sun warmth, his fingers finding her shoulder, sensing the quivering control that kept back the tears. "I'm sorry," he said, meaning it, because it was such an intense pain for someone this young. "I'm not forcing her," he said gently.

"I know." Karda swallowed, fighting with her pain and her tears. "She said she wouldn't, but I knew she would some day. She . . . lies about things like that. Sometimes . . . she lies to herself, I think."

Tracker frowned, feeling truth in the texture of her words. She knew that Yolanda lied. He wondered if the kiters had been created to know truth. He had thought that he was the only one. Perhaps City Man had sculpted it into other creations, too. Not Yolanda. Jesse had finished, and now looked up into the girl's face, her tail wagging, not worried about this one. Tracker saw the gleam of tears on her tawny cheeks, watched his fingers brush them away. "I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm not angry at you." Karda rose gracefully to her feet. "She would have gone when she was ready anyway."

Eleven, he thought. If the kiter children were dying at puberty . . . he sensed it ripening in her, that rich change from child to woman, felt a sudden deep pang of regret. Jesse whined and nudged his hand.

"Tracker, I'm ready to go." Yolanda's shadow fell across Jesse, the curve of her hip-spurs elongated curves on the ochre soil, the shadow of her head crowed with twin curves.

"Right now?" Karda's voice quivered.

Through Jesse's eyes, Tracker watched Yolanda cross swiftly to the girl, cup her face in her long-fingered hands, and kiss her gently on the forehead and cheeks. "Right now, my love," she said softly. For a moment her fingers lingered on the girl's golden hair, then she turned swiftly away to face Tracker. "I brought food and water."

Tracker hesitated. Now that he had found her, he had only to speak to City Man and he would send a flyer for them. He felt oddly reluctant to do so, and wasn't sure why.

"Give me your water bottles." Karda held her sorrow in a tight net of anger now. She seized them and hurried off, toward a distant van. Jesse growled and swung her head to show him Karin approaching, his expression grim.

Oh, yes, Karda's father. You could see it in the shape of his face.

"Catch up with me," Yolanda said. Fabric rustled as she swung a pack lightly to her shoulder and strode away, her scent trailing behind her.

Karin stopped, all churning emotion. "How did you know I was in City?" His voice was harsh.

Tracker shrugged. "It changes you. I felt it."

"I went back with him—the man who came for Yolanda. He let her stay here. I . . . didn't belong there." Karin's eyes narrowed, and for a moment a hint of fear gleamed on their surface. "What else do you feel?" he asked softly.

Your fear for your daughter, Tracker thought and didn't say. The death that waits in her with her womanhood. Your knowledge of the twisted sculpture in your cells that sends your kites into the sky. Yes, kite-flyer, you felt it when you walked through those City gates. That you are a sculpture and not a human. "Many things," he said aloud. He felt Karda approaching with the filled bottles. Again Karin's fear surfaced, bright as the flash of an ocean fish. He heard the kiter get heavily to his feet and move to take the dripping water bottles from his daughter and send her brusquely away. He thrust the bottles, cool and dripping, against Tracker's chest.

"Good-bye, stranger," he said, his voice hard. "I don't think we'll meet again."

In a small handful of years, they would all be dead, with no children to replace them. Tracker bowed his head, seeing the vans in the old woman's memory, bright and beautiful, their sails fluttering in the hot breeze. He turned away and Jesse bounded along next to him, very happy to be leaving this place. Yolanda had covered a lot of ground and led him now, a beacon far ahead, against the distant murmur of City and sea. He didn't try to catch up to her, content to follow, not needing Jesse's eyes to find Yolanda's trail in the breeze. He could open his link to City Man any time and the flyer would come.

He didn't open it.

They walked, separated by a space that grew neither wider nor narrower, until the sun's heat faded from his face and small creatures began to stir in their hiding places from the sun. As the last of the sun's heat faded, replaced by night's chill, Yolanda finally halted. Her eyes on the scatter of diamond stars overhead, she didn't move as Jesse led Tracker up to her. The moon was up, the red stain like a rose on its pale face, as Jesse lifted her nose to it. She wanted to howl, but did not. Yolanda took Jesse's face in her hands, her own face large in Tracker's shared sight. "I'm sorry," she murmured, stroking the dog's ears. "We were both cruel to you today."

Jesse thumped her tail wearily and flopped onto the still-warm sand, her tongue lolling. It was all sand here, white as snow beneath their feet, radiating away the day's heat as the air cooled. Water scented the air sweetly, and Yolanda pressed a bottle into Tracker's hand. The water had been flavored by her mouth, and he tasted her as he drank. Thick fabric

whispered, and Tracker guessed that she had pulled a blanket from her pack. It popped softly as she shook it out, then hissed against the sand. "Look at me." She spoke to Jesse, and they both looked.

She lay back on a yellow quilt made of kite fabric filled with soft plant fibers. Her shift slid up her long thigh, baring it to the polished curve of her hip-spur as she tilted her head to the sky. Her hair tumbled down over her shoulders, parted by the horns springing from her forehead. Silver moonlight gleamed like water on the polished curve of those horns.

"Do you know why Donai made me?" she asked at last, her voice dreamy.

Tracker, squatting by his pack, feeding meat to Jesse, didn't answer.

"He made me to love him. He made me to kill him one day."

She was speaking truth. Tracker looked up, his eyes narrowing. City people could die. It didn't happen often, but they could. No disease could touch them, they did not age. They could heal nearly any injury.

But . . . they could die.

If they chose to.

"I don't want to go back." Sorrow shivered in her words like the silver light, cold and beautiful. "But I have to." She rose to her feet suddenly, the twin moons above her head like a crown of light as she came to stand over him. Jesse whined, and lowered her head to her paws, tail thumping uncertainly as she banished Yolanda's face. "Do you know why I'm leaving, Tracker?"

"No." He didn't need Jesse's eyes. She filled his senses, as if the moon hovered before him, blazing with silver light and animal heat.

"I'm killing them. The children." Her voice was low and full of pain. "He must have done it when he came to get me and I wouldn't go. He changed me so that I poisoned them." Her resignation held a bitter note. "He always gets what he wants. " She reached down, taking his hands and pulling him to his feet. His toe caught the kite fabric quilt. "Come sit with me," she said, a mix of command and plea.

He sat on the soft slickness of the quilt that smelled of her. And of Karin. She knelt beside him to unlace his boots, burning like the spring sun, warming him, filling his senses with images of sun on bright fabric and clouds and blue sky. He felt her gaze on his face, and, suddenly, he understood. It was there, written like a silvery thread in the scent of her. Karda. Karin's daughter, but not Sairee's.

Yolanda's.

She stood suddenly and kite fabric rustled. Her shift pooled on the quilt beside him and he felt her spring-sun heat as she slid her leg across his waist to straddle him. He wanted to protest, but her heat drowned him, and as she pushed him back, he groped for memory of another moment like this, found shadows like slippery fish in the depths of his memory. Her mouth found his and her taut muscular body moved against his, and the shadow fish of memory fled.

He woke to the faint chill whisper of breeze that presaged the sun's warmth. The scent of dew on dry leaves and stone filled his nostrils, and the night-scurry of tiny lives all around. For a moment, he had no idea of where he was or when, simply floated in a limbo of cool air and scent.

Jesse was a furry warmth against his leg and head on his chest, Yolanda slept deeply. He felt the polished curve of her hip spur against his side. A small pain drew his fingers and he felt a crust of dried blood scabbing a shallow gash in his thigh. He had no memory of her spur tearing his skin.

A small uneasiness crept through him, something . . . wrong. He sharpened his senses, gathering them, shutting out the scurrying insect lives that filled the space around him and opening himself to the rush of blood through her veins, the spiral dance of her cells. Yes. His skin tightened, although not from the morning chill. As Yolanda stirred, he sat up, newly aware, feeling Jesse's flicker of wakening, her tail-thump of inquiry. He looked through her eyes to watch Yolanda toss the tangled gold of her hair back from her face, her eyes full of sleep and the memories of pleasure. Tracker swallowed against a sudden sharp ache in his chest.

"What's wrong?" She touched his face. "Your skin is the color of desert flower honey when the sun hits it, you know."

The invitation in her touch made him shiver again, and Jesse whined. Yolanda withdrew her hand. "Something *is* wrong."

"You're City." The words came out in a hushed tone, almost a whisper. He couldn't speak them aloud out here.

"I was born there." Yolanda considered, thoughtful. "The woman I called Mother lived with me in a garden. There were huge flowers and some of them moved their petals, like butterflies bound to a vine. That was his hobby then. Plants. But that's not what you mean."

"No." His throat was too dry, he had to swallow again to get the words out. "You *are* City. Like him. City Man. Donai. I can . . . I know it." It was there, that bright absence of Death.

She was shaking her head, sadness deepening.

"Not possible, Tracker. I . . . have a daughter, remember? City people can't breed with the beings they create. That has always been true."

And it was, and it was true, he had sensed her relationship to Karda, had forgotten in the shock of his discovery. He groped for her hand, lifted the palm to his face, tasting that absence on her skin. She had to be City. Yolanda made no effort to pull her hand away.

"You scared me when I first saw you, blind Tracker. It's as if I live on the surface of the world that you inhabit. You see things, sense things, that I can't perceive and that scares me."

Jesse was looking at his own face now, carved with strain, but he could feel the emerald pressure of her eyes on him.

"And you scared me," she went on softly, "because I thought you were City, here to claim me, not someone sent by Donai." She paused, her stare warm against his skin. "At night, years ago, Karin would come to my bed. And in the morning, after he had gone back to sleep with Sairee, I would smell him on my hair and skin, as if his spirit was still lying in my arms. What are you sensing, Tracker? I am dying a little with every passing day, ticking off a finite life. What about you? Tell me about the woman who carried you, Tracker. I remember mine. I called her Mother, and she sang to me in the sun of the garden."

"No." It was sigh more than whisper. He wanted to tell her that he remembered, describe this woman for her.

He could not.

Grope as he might, all he found was a chain of days that disappeared into a far distance, endlessly. Before Jesse, another creature, lithe and furry, and before that one, before that one?

"City people don't just breed." Yolanda went on relentlessly. "They select genotypes, they match carefully. There are only so many who can live in City, only so many who can be admitted to share the universe. Donai told me about this, about the rules. That is the only rule they may not break, Tracker. To breed without consensus, without permission. I remember when he told me, Tracker. It was not long after I had left the garden, when I was his lover. And his words were bitter, but his tone was not, and I wondered about that."

He felt her smile, sharp and cold as a blade edge against his skin. "I think *you* are City, Tracker. Didn't you ever notice? Were you too close to see it? I think you are Donai's own son."

She was right, oh yes, the memory was there, opening now, unrolling like an endless carpet, drawing his mind's eye back though a storm of days and nights and days, faces, voices, hands touching, animal fur and cold noses, summers and winters. . . . Drowning. All the time, City Man's face, everywhere, in all the seasons. City Man. Donai. Drowning. Tracker sank silently beneath the endless, bottomless sea of yesterdays, weighed down by his sudden understanding of . . . what he was.

He woke to nighttime cold, to the rough-wet caress of Jesse's tongue punctuated by the cold thrust of her nose. He was lying on the fabric quilt and the crackle of flame and scent of smoke suggested a fire nearby. Jesse nudged him again. He reached out, patted her, dizzy briefly as the deep sea of past threatened to suck him down once more. For an instant, a hundred Jesses with different fur and form and faces nudged him. Treading water in those depths, he focused until he was aware of only *this one,* and sat up.

"I was getting worried." Yolanda sat on the corner of the quilt, Jesse showing him her knees drawn up, her shift pulled down over her legs for warmth. "We're nearly out of water. I didn't find any communication device in your pack, so I assume you need to call Donai yourself. And the Caravan is heading east, not west. So we're on our own." But no trace of worry colored her words. "You've been unconscious for two days. I gave the dog the rest of the food."

He might not ever have waked up. For a long time, he had been lost in the depths of that huge chaotic sea. He might never have found his way back to *this* moment, *this* time. Slowly, Tracker reached out to touch her arm. She accepted his touch, even put her hand on his with a gentle sympathy.

That acceptance was the same acceptance that Jesse offered him.

Tracker summoned City Man through his link. Then they waited for the flyer, which arrived as the day's heat grew. City Man was not on board, and Tracker felt a moment of piercing gratitude for that. They climbed the ramp, Yolanda first, her cool composure tinged with sorrow, then Tracker, and last Jesse, panting in the noonday heat. The cushioned interior was cool, and Tracker got Jesse a bowl of water from the refresh-

ment wall. A tiled shower cabinet drew Yolanda to strip and step inside, turning so that the jets of warm water scoured every square centimeter of her lithe body. He looked through Jesse's eyes at the sleek curves of her flesh, momentarily swept away by the memory of the night spent with her on the kite fabric blanket beneath the ancient and weary sky.

He grieved for it.

She emerged, dry, naked, and glowing. She didn't invite him to make love to her. She would surely accept if he asked, would no more refuse than Jesse would refuse his summons. That had been built into her, lay there as real as the shadow of Death.

He didn't ask.

He could feel the swift approach of City. Beyond it, the sand people would be working on the sculptures that the waves would erase. The flyer skimmed above City's silent clamor, settled into the quiet lawn behind City Man's residence. Grass like living velvet gave beneath Tracker's feet as he stepped out. Yolanda leaped lightly down beside him, but her sorrow clouded the air around them. Jesse kept her eyes low, tail down, afraid. He closed his fingers in her fur, tugging gently, and he felt her tail move briefly.

City Man was in the garden. Jesse showed him blue-flowered twining plants. The snaky shoots wove about his legs, not touching him, their blue flowers like eyes. As he and Yolanda and Jesse approached, the vines lifted and pointed in their direction. Jesse shouldered into Yolanda and planted her feet, refusing to move farther. Yolanda stood still, her knees against the furry barricade that was Jesse. Tracker felt her gaze fixed on City Man.

Tracker walked up to him, not needing Jesse's eyes. The vine things twined briefly around his calves and then released him, retreating as if he poisoned them. They knew City when they felt it. Like Yolanda. "Donai," Tracker said.

City Man's attention focused sharply on Tracker. The plants cowered away from both of them, and City Man finally shifted his attention to them. "Waste of time," he said. "I'll have to start over. I never doubted you'd find her."

"She's not yours anymore," Tracker said gently. "Donai."

City Man's attention was on him fully, now. "I can go to the City Council." Tracker enunciated each syllable precisely. "I can tell them what you did. What I am."

Stillness. A spike of caution, quickly extinguished. "What I did?" City Man put on a good-humored tolerance that was as translucent as gauze. "And what *are* you, besides a very well-created tracking dog?"

"I'll go to the Council and tell them that I am . . . your son. Father." The word made him sway, and the dark, bottomless sea beneath his feet nearly rose to swallow him again. But the effect on City Man was visible. He went still, and Tracker tasted his . . . vulnerability.

This was new. Never before.

"Yolanda couldn't know," City Man whispered.

"Oh no." Tracker shook his head, demons shrieking inside his skull. "She doesn't know. I simply . . . remembered."

"You can't," City Man said calmly. "You don't have the ability. I made sure of that."

It was an admission, and they both realized it at the same instant. City Man swallowed, an audible, dry sound. "They'll destroy you, if you tell them."

Tracker bent his head, wishing he could cry, but that ability had slipped away from him as he drowned in that vast sea. "They'll destroy us both, Father." Again. The name burned them both equally.

"They denied my petition for offspring." City Man breathed the words. "My DNA contains too many flaws. But it also contains vast talent. I can twist that ladder to create people and tribes, plants and animals, that no one has ever been able to rival. I can do things that nobody else can do, no matter how much they copy me. So what if you can sculpt glaciers, mountains, the face of the moon? I can sculpt races!" He turned to face Tracker, filled with a depthless calm. "They'll destroy you. Think about that. You have forever."

It was a weapon, those three sentences. Oh, he felt it, that tug of cells. *Live forever*. It weakened his knees, called to him with a Siren's voice to go back to his garden, pet Jesse, and make love to Yolanda. He could do that. City Man would reward him for doing that. He would help him to pretend, and, after awhile, Tracker would . . . forget. The promise was there. And real. "Let's walk," he said, and it was the first command he had ever uttered.

City Man complied, and that was another admission. They strolled away from the cowering vines, through a garden of growing green things, sweet with the scents of plant sex. Behind them, Jesse and Yolanda waited, and Tracker felt a clench of sorrow for the similarity of their waiting. Tracker finally stopped, feeling the silence between them like a pair of crossed swords, a silent struggle. Tracker shrugged suddenly, fingers groping to find a fleshy blossom humming with a summer's joy. He fingered the petals gently, did not pick it. "Who was my mother?" he asked.

"You don't remember." A silver thread of triumph wove City Man's words together.

Tracker shook his head. "I just can't find her." She was there somewhere, lost in that sea. " I would like to know." And he wasn't challenging, wasn't threatening, was merely . . . asking.

City Man walked on and Tracker followed, waiting.

"There was no other." The words came slowly. "I used my DNA, recombined it to grow, and implanted it in a . . . creation." He was silent for a long time. "I . . . sculpted you." He spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "If I wasn't good enough for them, then I could make *you* into whatever I wanted. I gave you a gift."

Tracker felt his stare as City Man pivoted to face him, like desert sunlight on his skin.

"You can't remember. Not for more than a few decades. Tell me about your last lover? Your last dog?" Sly triumph shaded his words. "I made you immortal, but I gave you a mortal memory."

And by that, he could own Tracker forever. Tracker lifted his head, feeling the early starlight on his face, remembering the wide, bright eyes of the kiter girl. "You failed," he said gently. He reached out to touch his father's face, felt the hard edge of his disbelief. "I could wish you had succeeded."

"You belong to me. If you tell, we both die," Donai whispered. "Life forever. It's not so easy to give up."

"No," Tracker said. "It's not." Then he turned and walked away, not needing eyes, back to where Jesse and Yolanda waited beneath the silver moon.

The sun was barely peeking up over the horizon as Tracker crested the desert rise and spied through Jesse's eyes the circle of kite-roofed wagons below. He halted, and Yolanda came up to stand beside him, still and silent, her awareness of his City flesh a thin and impenetrable wall between them, one that would always be there.

Her scent tickled him, overlaid with dust and the bright, spiraling joy of the kiters' morning flight as their kites twined the dry sky. It had changed, her scent, richer now, tinged with tentative new life. He groped, touched the polished curve of her hip spur, felt the texture of her joy. It matched the kiters's.

With a sigh, he stepped forward, making his way with Jesse's guidance down the gentle slope of the sage-covered hill that had once been a roving dune, but was now netted to the earth with roots. Before they reached the bottom, a figure emerged from one of the wagons and ran to meet them.

"I knew you were coming." Karda halted breathless in front of them. "I knew you were coming back!"

Yolanda stepped forward, arms outstretched, enfolding the child to her. The girl winced slightly as one hip spur scratched her arm lightly, but barely noticed the tiny trickle of blood.

And so she was inoculated with the antidote to City Man's lethal virus. And Yolanda would free the rest of the kiters from City Man's vengeance. That had been part of Tracker's bargain with City Man. He looked through Jesse's eyes and found Karda standing in front of him, looking up at him. "Are you going to stay here, too? Forever?"

"Yes," he said.

She frowned, because she could sense truth, and this was not truth, but it was not a lie, either. "For as long as you live," he said, and that truth she heard.

"I'm a lot younger than you," she said, with a child's forthrightness.

"You are." He smiled, because for the kiters, he was like them. Not City. Yolanda might know, but she would not say, and here he would be . . . not alone. And that tentative silver note of life in Yolanda would grow and strengthen, and, in a space of time, would be born as a child. His child, and Yolanda's. You made me too much like them, Tracker thought. Enough to do this. Enough not to fear Death. He groped for Karda's hand and she closed her small, slender fingers around his. For awhile, this would be an island, where he would learn to swim in the dark sea that lurked in his head. And when the child was old enough, they would leave. Because there were others like them. He felt them. Behind him, he felt the distant forever murmur of City rising beside the patient sea. Beginning and end, he thought. My gift to you. Father.

With Karda guiding his feet, they walked through the sage as the first kite spiraled upward to meet the rising sun, and, for the first time, Tracker felt a sense of peace. ❍

THE DARK SIDE OF TOWN

James Patrick Kelly

James Patrick Kelly tells us, "This was one of the harder tales I've written. I had to put it aside for some time while I figured out what it was about. Usually I just march right through a story—for better or worse. I'd like to thank my friends in the Cambridge Science Fiction Workshop for helping me get to the dark side of town." The trade paperback edition of the author's short story collection, *Think Like a Dinosaur,* is finally out from Golden Gryphon Press. The original hardcover sold out several years ago.

Talisha found the pills in Ricky's underwear drawer under the maroon boxers she had never seen him wear. There were three of them in a cotton nest tucked into a flat cardboard box. She dumped them onto her palm: clear capsules, about as long as her fingernail with the Werefolk logo imprinted on the side. She thought she could almost see the nano beasties swimming inside.

It made her angry that Ricky had not tried harder to hide the pills. Did he think she was stupid? She subscribed to *Watch This!* and *Ed Explains It All* and usually opened new episodes the moment they popped into her inbox. Her earstone was set to deliver *The Two Minute Report* three times a day, whether she was near a pix or not. She had even uploaded an Introduction to Feng Shui course last year. From Purdue, a name brand college!

All that time he'd been telling her there wasn't enough money for them to have their baby, much less buy a house, he'd been wasting it on some mechdream. It was one thing to pay for nano to mess with your brain so you could design living rooms or program searchlets or speak Russian or something. Talisha understood that you had to spend money to make money. But it was another thing altogether to spend the grocery money building some virtual sex playpen. And everyone said that Werefolk made

the sickest mechdreams of all. Creatures with the legs of giraffes and four tits stroking one another with power tools and chicken giblets. Stuff so dark that even Ed himself couldn't quite explain it.

Her hands trembled as she waved the pills in front of the pix and waited for it to scan them. It was a slow, twelve-year-old Sony and the screen had more bad pixels than interpolation could correct, but it was all they could afford.

"X-Stasis release 7.01 from Werefolk Corporation," said the pix. "List price: seven hundred and ninety-eight dollars for a multiplex map-and-transmit regime."

Eight hundred dollars! "What does it do?" she said grimly.

An ad popped onto the pix. It began with a tight shot on a talking head. "With the Werefolk virtual reality six-pack," said a beautiful young woman, "we bring ecstasy to a new level." She appeared to be standing on a beach; behind her a blue sky melted into a glassy ocean. "Using our exclusive X-Stasis personality probe, we'll help you plumb the depths of your pleasure centers." She smiled and was immediately transformed into a beautiful young man. "Only X-Stasis can access the neurons where your unconscious lurks and transmit your innermost desires to Werefolk. Together we can build a secret world for you to enjoy on our secure servers, the world they said you could never have." The camera pulled back slowly and Talisha could see that the beautiful young man wasn't wearing a shirt. "Surprise yourself today with an tour of your hidden self and begin your intimate journey into rapture."

Just before the camera could reveal that the beautiful young man wasn't wearing any pants either, the ad cut away to an older, roundish woman in a daisy-print dress. A caption identified her as Mrs. Lonnie Foster of Holland, Michigan. She was standing in front of a barn.

"There was a time a couple of months ago when I felt about as dry as a saltine, you know? I'd look at myself in the mirror and say, 'Hey Lonnie, who's doing for you?' Then I heard about Werefolk and decided to do for myself. Now don't you be asking what goes on up in Lonnie's Castle." She giggled like a little girl. "Like they said, that's private. But I do love to spend time there, oh my *yes*. And it's safe as taking a nap. . . ."

Talisha waved the ad off; it was only confusing her. Of course, she didn't care anything about the beautiful young people in the ad; they weren't even real. But Lonnie's question had struck home. Who was doing for Talisha?

"Call Ricky," she said. The pix queried his workshop.

Ricky answered in voice mode. "What?" He didn't like to be bothered when he was working.

"Are you plumbing the depths?"

"Talisha, I'm busy."

"Give me video, you bastard."

He told the cam to turn on and she saw that he was standing at his bench, surrounded by broken 1/18 scale model carbots: Mazdas and Duesenbergs and Chevys, dump trucks and road graders. He was tinkering with the harmonic speed reducer from the arm assembly of a Komatsu excavator. He stared up at her. "What did you just call me?"

"I called you a lying bastard pervert."

He blanched and set the reducer down next to its servomotor.

"What are these?" She held the pills up to the pix.

"So you've been going through my things?" he said. She expected anger or remorse—something—but his eyes were empty.

"I was putting your damn underwear away."

"And?" He glanced away from the pix as if something had distracted him.

"Where did you get eight hundred dollars?"

He picked up a circuit tester and turned his attention back to the Komatsu. "I earned it."

"*Ricky*." She couldn't believe that he was acting as if nothing had happened. "Okay, you earned it. Where does that leave us?"

"Us?" He seemed preoccupied as he clipped the tester to the encoder cable. He shook his head. She couldn't tell if he were disappointed in the signal or their marriage. "You know I love you, 'Sha."

"You have a funny way of showing it." She opened her hand and let his pills rattle onto the coffee table. "The air conditioner is broken. I had to cancel my subscription to church. Supper tonight is Beanstix from the Handimart." She hated hearing herself whine. "Is it me, Ricky? You'd rather have a make-believe woman than me?" She waited for him to answer or defend himself or *something*.

"I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

His indifference took her breath away. It was as if he didn't realize how he was hurting her. Then she remembered something Ed had explained about mechdreams. You could be in one and still go about your normal life, he said, as long as you didn't have to pay too close attention to what you were really doing. He said you could tell when people were double-dipping because they acted like zombies. He said it was a growing problem. As many as a million people were living two lives at the same time, everyone from security guards to college professors.

"You're there now," she said. "In Ricky World or Ricky's Dungeon or Temple Fucking Ricky."

"Talisha," he said, "I'm at work." He waved the connection off.

She stared at the blank pix as if it were a hole through which her life was leaking. Then she swiped the pills off the coffee table, scattering them. "*You goddamn bastard.*" She stalked around their tiny studio apartment like it was a cage. It helped to keep swearing at Ricky. Some of the words she had never spoken before and they seemed to twist in her mouth. She tore the slick sheets off the bed where she had let that "*sickass jackoff*" make love to her. She stuffed them into the washing machine that was crammed next to the toilet in the tiny bathroom that was all the "*loser suckwad*" said they could afford. She flew at the galley kitchen and yanked open the door of their half-sized refrigerator. She didn't know why exactly, since there was never anything in it that she wanted to eat. But she stared at the liter of Uncle Barth's Rice Milk and a couple of Beefy Beanstix and some Handibrand Dijon mustard with the brown crust on the mouth of the jar and the Brisky Spread and the stub of a Porky Beanstix left over from last night and the wilting stalks of bak choi and the two bulbs of Miller Beer that the "*cheap shiteating cheater*" would expect to have with supper. She smashed them against the side of the sink and then sagged against the wall.

She would have cried then except that her earstone started whispering, "Talisha, ya ladyay, connect, *Talisha*." It was her sister, Bea. Talisha waved the kitchen pix to clock mode and groaned. She was already twenty minutes late for work.

"I'm here, Bea." She waved the pix on but backed away so her sister wouldn't get a clear look at her. Talisha worked for her sister on Wednesdays and Fridays.

"Well, at least you're somewhere, my ladyloo. Only not here on the job." Bea was already wearing her stereoptic goggles. They made her look like a frog, but then her sister had never been a great beauty anyway. "The Herndens dropped another box yesterday." Bea ran *Tapeworm* out of her attic; she was teaching her sister the business of extracting data from dead media. Her specialty was late twentieth-century consumer magnetic tape: reel-to-reel, eight track, cassette, Beta, VHS, Hi8, and DAT. "They're blinky, but we can work them. Mostly type three and four decay: we got sticky shed *and* flaking. What are you standing offcam for?"

"I don't feel so good, Bea."

"Come close. Let your sister see."

Talisha stepped forward and stuck her chin at the pix.

"Ladyla, this is not your best look." She lifted her goggles and peered at Talisha. "You're not coming to work today, are you?"

"No." She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"You're sick?"

If she told Bea what had happened, her sister would be hauling Ricky down Elm Street by the collar of his coat. "Yeah, I think so. It hit me when I got out of bed."

"Sick in the morning?" Bea grinned. "You're pregnant?"

She sighed. "Bea, I'm having a rough day here. . . ."

"Is it the baby you've been wanting?" Now she was laughing. "You said you've been trying, Ladyla and Lord Ricky."

They *had* been trying, or at least, Ricky hadn't objected when she stopped buying him birth control pills. But he hadn't reached across the bed for her for almost two weeks now. Probably since he started with his *damnfuck* pills.

"I told you not to tell anyone."

"And I didn't. We're talking here, like two sisters should. What, do you want a secure line?"

"I don't think it's . . . I don't know what it is." Talisha realized that this might be the only way to get rid of Bea. "Maybe I do need to buy a test."

Bea clapped her hands. "That's news, Lady 'Sha. That's the newsiest news I've heard today."

"Bea, don't."

"Okay. You stay home today, little sister. Take your test and God bless." She waved at Talisha and the pix went blank.

Talisha did cry then. The tears came hot and fast and her cheeks burned with them. She would be lost without Ricky. "Without Ricky," she said, to hear how it sounded. "Without that *chiseling cock-for-brains*." She sank onto the couch and hugged her favorite pillow to her chest. It purred and breathed the scent of gardenias up at her. Ricky had given her the pillow

for their sixth anniversary. Actually, she had wanted a new rug because Ricky had knocked a candle over and burnt a hole in the old one. The apartment was so small and Ricky got clumsy after a few beers. But a rug wasn't in the budget and so she had moved the coffee table to cover the hole. Talisha began to rock back and forth, squeezing the pillow. The rug didn't matter anymore. Nothing did. If she and Ricky split, she'd never have the baby or the beautiful house she had always dreamed of. In fact, she'd have to move; there was no way she could afford the rent on what Bea was paying her. She thought of the tube rack where she had been living when she met Ricky. Her mod had been seven by seven by fourteen. She glanced around the apartment. None of this furniture would fit. The pillow and the rug would probably be all she'd be able to keep. She felt grief hollowing her out; she thought she might cave in on herself when her earstone started whispering again. She tossed her head as if to shake it loose but it was patient. It just wanted her to know that there were two new messages in her inbox.

"From Ricky?" She felt a flicker of hope.

"One is a bill from Infoline for $87.22. The other is *The Two Minute Report.*"

TTMR episode opened automatically and the pix trumpeted its theme, *Fanfare for Right Now*. A news reader with a voice as smooth and bright as a mirror announced that Rabbi-Senator Gallman would be shutting down over the long weekend for routine maintenance. Talisha wiped the tears from her face. She didn't care that Pin Pan was in Akron to campaign for the Death Amendment or that 21 percent of all guide dogs could now read at a third grade level. She didn't need news. She needed advice. She needed. . . .

Ed.

The idea brought her to her feet in excitement. She could *ask Ed*. She tossed the pillow on the couch and began to pace around the apartment. There was no time to enter her problem in his Question Queue. He might not get to it for weeks. Months. But for a fee, she could jump the queue and access Ed in real time. Of course, it would be hideously expensive. But so what? Would it cost as much as Ricky's pills? She hoped so. She couldn't wait to see his expression when he opened the bill.

But she couldn't meet Ed looking like a trashy, jilted housewife. Talisha scrubbed her face and then sprayed on a hot shade of Benetint. She changed into her *de Chaumont* pantsuit and settled herself on the couch in front of the pix. She turned the pix into a mirror so she could see herself as Ed would see her. She tilted her head and tried for an assured, casual look. Then she brought up *Ed Explains It All* and clicked through greeting to the contract pages for a personal interview. The fee agreement almost stopped her. It was going to cost her a *hundred dollars a minute* to get Ed's advice. But then she thought about how smart he was. How calm. She opened a window to check the balance on their bank account. They had $2393.89, but they needed eleven hundred for the July rent. Twelve minutes then, what she had was a twelve-minute problem. She was thinking about how to tell it as she opened their account to the contract genie.

Talisha wasn't expecting to be connected immediately. She thought some secretary would come on the pix and they would schedule an ap-

pointment or something. But when she thumbed the last contract page, Ed himself peered into her tiny apartment.

"Go ahead," he said. "I'm listening."

This wasn't the familiar Ed of the bi-weekly episode, who sat at a desk in a vast library, resplendent in his characteristic white suit, dark blue shirt, and paisley tie. This Ed was wearing green plaid pajamas and he needed a shave. He was sitting at a table in a sunny room pouring Cheerios into a bowl.

"Ed," she said, "Is that you?"

"It is. Go ahead please."

"But I . . . I mean I wasn't . . . wait, are you real?"

He sighed and peeled a banana. "That question cost you seventeen dollars, madam. Have you ever read Hegel?"

"My name is Talisha. Hegel who?"

"Hegel wrote, 'The will is a special way of thinking; it is thought translating itself into reality; it is the impulse of thought to give itself reality.' Now Talisha, do you want me to be real? Is such your will?"

Talisha wondered if this was a trick question. "Uh, I guess so."

"Well, then." Ed began to cut the banana onto his Cheerios. "Go ahead please."

Breathlessly, she told him about Ricky, their marriage, their money problems and the mechdream pills. At a hundred dollars a minute, there was obviously a lot she had to leave out, but she was satisfied that she had done a good job of painting a picture of her husband as the *lying asswipe* that he was. While she spoke, Ed spooned up his breakfast. She couldn't help but notice that he was a very neat eater. Talisha always had to sponge off the kitchen table after Ricky ate.

Ed aimed his spoon at her when she finished. "But you *do* love him?"

"I. . . ." Her cheeks flushed and she thought she might cry again. Instead she said, "Yes."

Ed considered this for ten or twelve dollars. "Who is he thinking of when you have intercourse?" he said finally.

"I don't know." She squirmed on the couch. "Me, I hope."

Ed shook his head wearily. "Let me put it this way, who are you thinking of?"

"Him." She could hear the squeak in her voice.

"Don't waste your money, Talisha, or my time. Do you keep your eyes closed when you're having intercourse?"

"I do." But then he would know that, wouldn't he? He was *Ed*. "Well, sometimes I think of Sanjay Deol."

"The pilot on *Let It Ride*? The one with the blue hair?"

She nodded. She couldn't believe she was telling her sexual fantasies to Ed and paying a hundred dollars a minute for the privilege. "And I used to think of Burt Christmas, but not since he took up with Pernilla Jones."

"All right. Now then, what's Richie's favorite part of your body?"

"Ricky." Talisha frowned and then held up her hand. "He said once that I had such pretty, long fingers." She gazed at them as if surprised to find them at the end of her arm. "He said I should've learned to play a musical instrument. Like flute or piano or something."

Ed smiled. "Touch the pix with your pretty fingers, Talisha."

She bolted from the couch and pressed the tips of her fingers to the screen.

"Good." He touched his own pix, so that his hand lined up with hers. Talisha's heart pounded. They were so close, even though she had no idea where he was. His face was serene. Kind. She decided that the next time she had sex, she might try thinking about Ed.

"People think I can solve their problems, Talisha, but I can't—not really." He turned back to the table and picked up his bowl and the box of Cheerios. "But I can tell you what to do if you want to stay married."

"I do," she whispered. "I don't know why, but I still want him."

"Then you'll have to go to where he is," said Ed. "See what he's doing."

Talisha spent the rest of the day thinking. It was hard work. She drank two cups of Zest and washed three loads of laundry and vacuumed the entire apartment and never once turned on the pix to watch any of her shows. She crawled on hands and knees to gather Ricky's pills. Of course, she had known right away what Ed had meant about going to him. He was telling her to take one of the pills so she could enter his mechdream. But she wasn't sure that she wanted to know what Ricky was hiding in his secret world. It was bad enough watching him brush his teeth. Now she had to be an eyewitness to his forbidden desires?

Talisha started when the door to the apartment opened at five-thirty and Ricky walked in. He had finished work, so he had come home, of course. She thought he might at least have the decency to get stinking smart in some bar, stagger in at two in the morning and come crawling to their bed to beg her forgiveness. Instead he hung his Titans jacket in the closet and dropped his computer on the coffee table as coolly as if he were a finalist for Husband of the Year.

"So?" Talisha said.

"So I don't want to talk about it right now."

"Fine," she said. "That's just fine."

He slid to the other side of the apartment to avoid her and squeezed between the couch and the ugly lamp his mother had given them. She didn't follow him into the sleeping closet; she knew what he was looking for.

"Where are they?" He came to the door.

"I hid them."

"Okay." He went back to change out of his work clothes.

And that was it. She didn't believe he'd be able to pull it off, but he was his usual leaden self while he watched *The Sports Witch*. Then he played *You Can Say That Again* and climbed all the way to 11,234 out of 90,645. Talisha thought about frying just one Beefy Beanstix for herself but then she decided that if he could act as if their world wasn't ending, then so could she.

"Dinner," she called.

He came to the table and stared at the glass of water next to his slab of Beanstix. "Am I out of beer?"

"I poured them all down the sink," she said brightly.

He shrugged and sat down. "Okay."

Talisha tried to eat but she wasn't hungry. The air felt thick to her. Or something. The only sound in their apartment was the click of Ricky's

fork against his plate. The silence didn't seem to bother him. He probably didn't even notice it. His body was in the apartment but his mind was probably riding cowgirls at Ricky's Ranch. She felt certain that she could've set his pants on fire and he wouldn't have complained. So how long had he been like this? Talisha wasn't sure now. Ricky had never been much of a talker but at least he used to ask her about her day when he came home. She would tell him about what she and Bea were working on, give him the news from *Amy Anderson* or *TTMR*. He managed to look interested when she described all the beautiful homes she'd seen on *Mainly Mansions*.

When Ricky finished eating, he cleared his plate—and hers—and waved them under the dishwasher. Talisha stared at his back as he put the dishes away. Then she watched him sidle to the couch. He sat and opened his messages. She leaned back, waiting for the explosion.

"Talisha, what's this bill about?" he called.

"I talked to Ed."

"Eleven hundred dollars worth?"

"He explained some things to me."

Ricky thought this over. "Okay."

Talisha couldn't believe it. She'd torched their finances and he was acting like a light bulb had burned out. He cleared the messages off the pix and began to click through the menus on *The Classic Car Channel*. "Is that why you're all dressed up?" he said.

She had forgotten that she was still in her *de Chaumont* pantsuit. She'd bought it three years ago and only wore it on special occasions like birthdays and anniversaries. Up until today, she had only worn it for *him*. Well, maybe there weren't going to be any more damn anniversaries.

"Fuck you, Ricky." She flew into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

She had stashed the flat cardboard box with her tampons. In a rage she shook one of Ricky's pills into her hand and popped it into her mouth. She'd go where he was, all right. She leaned over the sink and drank directly from the tap to wash the nasty thing down. She'd stick her head into his little pervert palace and tell him to shove the rest of his pills up his zombie ass.

She closed the toilet lid and sat down. She had no idea how the pill would affect her. As she waited, she thought about Ed's green plaid pajamas. She wondered if maybe she could live with Bea. She noticed that they were almost out of toilet paper. Her brain felt odd. There were toothpaste spots on the mirror. She wasn't sure that she had ever felt her brain before. It was a tickle, no, it was more like bubbles bursting and each bubble was the note of a song that she didn't recognize but if she concentrated, she could sort of pick up the melody and then bits of lyric, something about The Dark Side of Town and the woman who lived there or maybe a woman who was going there, *yes*, that was it, a woman was going to see another woman who lived on The Dark Side of Town and that woman was her, *Talisha,* and now it was getting **dark** in the bathroom only that wasn't right because she could see the water stain where the ceiling leaked and then the door opened and Ricky came and helped her up off the toilet and said *It's hard the first time* as he took her by the arm and led her to the sleeping closet and then she

was lying on the bed and he was taking off her shoes and she was so sad as he paused to turn off the light and the door *snicked* shut.

There was a parking lot on The Dark Side of Town. The cars lined up in rows had headlights on and engines running but they weren't going anywhere. Talisha didn't like the looks of them. They were old-fashioned cars, the models for the carbots that Ricky fixed. She had seen the full-sized ones mostly in the old, flat movies and in that museum. Not many people rode in the old cars anymore. Certainly not Talisha. As she approached the parking lot she could see lights inside the cars—and shadowy people.

Ricky rolled down the window of a long, low, green car that looked like it had melted in the sun. "You like it?" he said. "It's a 1969 Pontiac GTO with a Ram Air III 400 cubic inch engine." Ricky was wearing a sky blue tuxedo. "Eight cylinders, 366 horse power." A woman was curled up on the tiny back seat, seemingly asleep.

"What is this, Ricky?"

He closed his hand over the stick shift. "It's a Hurst T-handle four speed."

"I mean, who's *that?*" She wanted to throttle the woman but there was only one door on this side. Talisha would've had to drag Ricky out of the driver's seat to get at her. "Hey you!" She stuck her head in the window. "Who the hell are you?"

"A posi rear axel," said Ricky.

The woman stirred.

"There's nobody but you, 'Sha," he said.

When the woman raised her face into the dim glow of the dome light, Talisha could see it was true. It was her, like a double or something. She was dressed in shimmer tights and a zebra print halter top, clothes that Talisha had thrown out years ago. She looked to be wearing Talisha's favorite pink lipstick, "Baby Kiss."

"So get in." Ricky reached across to the passenger door and opened it.

"And do what?"

Ricky leered and stepped on the gas. Three hundred and sixty-six horses screamed.

Talisha gave him her back and strode down the line of cars. But there was no escape. He called to her from every car. "1990 Jaguar XJS! 1929 Duesenberg J Murphy Roadster! 1952 DeSoto FireDome!"

As she passed an enormous boxy sedan with tiny windshields, he honked the horn. It startled her and she jumped.

"1932 Chrysler CL Custom Imperial," he said. "Oilite squeak-proof springs. Double drop girder truss. . . ."

"Stop it, Ricky."

He opened the door and got out of the car. "Why did you swallow that pill, 'Sha?"

"So I could tell you to go suck cactus."

"You could've done that at the apartment." Now he was wearing a gray one-button cutaway tuxedo with a lavender vest and matching four-in-hand tie. "You wanted to see what I was doing, didn't you?" He crossed the front of the car, brushing a finger along the elaborate chrome grill.

"And now I have, thanks so much." But she hesitated. "Who's dressing you, anyway?" she said.

"You like?" He struck a pose and then turned around slowly to give her the full effect. "I uploaded a fashion bug." He opened the rear passenger door. "You haven't seen it all, Talisha. Come look."

She heard the sleeping closet door open and the real Ricky tiptoed in. He didn't turn on the lights.

"Internal hydraulic brakes," said the Ricky in the mechdream. "All steel body. Floating power engine mountings."

The old box springs of their bed creaked as Ricky lay down. He didn't touch her but she could sense his nearness by the sag of the mattress. "Please Talisha," he whispered. "Let me show you."

Talisha saw her double lounging on the back seat in a pink felt smoking jacket over a plum crepe gown. Her face was partially obscured by the netting draped from her shrimp-colored pillbox hat and the plume of smoke from the Chesterfield cigarette in her left hand. Talisha had never smoked before and never would. On the seat next to the double was a wicker bassinet. When the baby gurgled, Talisha felt like she'd been slapped.

"Whose is that?"

"Ours." Ricky beamed at her.

"Yours, you mean."

"I know you've been wanting to have a kid." He reached past her and rubbed his knuckle against the baby's cheek. "It's a little boy. So what should we name it?"

"How the fuck should I know. Ask *her*."

For a second the two Talishas stared at each other. Then the double rolled her window down and flipped her cigarette out at The Dark Side of Town.

"She doesn't speak," said Ricky. "She's just a place holder."

"This is sick." Talisha shook her head. "It's not real, Ricky. Nothing here is. It's all inside your head."

"Sure, and now it's inside your head too. That's the point. Two more pills and you'll lock in to the servers at Werefolk."

She gazed at him in astonishment and horror.

"What do you think I've been doing here, 'Sha? Getting this place ready for you."

Talisha turned and ran back the way she had come.

Ricky called after her. "It's the only way for people like us."

"But I don't want to live in a car." Talisha said as she rolled onto her side. Ricky was watching her, his eyes bright in the gloom of the sleeping closet. "Not even in a whole fleet of cars." She reached across the bed and touched his arm.

"Then don't," said Ricky.

The biggest car she had ever seen edged out of the line, blocking her way. She heard the hum of an electric motor and then Ricky stuck his head through a hole in the roof. "2005 Ford Excursion XLT Premium with optional moonroof. It has a V-10 engine, 310 horses."

"What do you mean, *don't?*" Talisha said.

He pulled the SUV up beside her. Talisha was wearing a fawn-colored fleece jacket, twill khakis and a lavender turtleneck, clothes she had never owned before in her life. She opened the front passenger door and looked in.

"Rear seat DVD with a twelve inch LCD," said Ricky. "Ten cup holders."

The Excursion was as huge on the inside as it looked from the outside, but it still wasn't big enough to live in. There were three rows of two-toned leather seats. The baby was strapped into a rear-facing car seat behind Ricky. The double was gone.

"Want to go for a spin?" Ricky's face shone in the light of the instrument console.

They cruised The Dark Side of Town, their headlights illuminating blank facades and empty lots. "I'm not ready for sun," said Ricky. "In the daylight, all the holes would show. But now that you're here, more stuff will get done. Here it is." He pressed a button on the dash and a garage door began to open. "I haven't done any decorating yet." He pulled into the middle bay of a three car garage. The other two bays were empty.

Talisha slid across the bed and gave Ricky a tentative caress. He whooped and pulled her on top of him **as he shut the Excursion off. Talisha stepped down from the car and took in the garage. Her garage. The walls were white. The white steel door that opened into the house was up two steps to the left. The garage was nice, but way too plain.** Ricky kissed Talisha and she ran her tongue along the edges of his front teeth **as she traced the spot on the garage wall where the window ought to be with her long, pretty fingers. A nine-light Prairie Style double hung with real wood grilles shimmered into existence. Yes, that was better, but not quite there yet. Her window needed some curtains, say chintz. With big yellow roses.**

"It's a garage, 'Sha." said Ricky. "Who hangs curtains in a garage?" He fumbled at the front snap of Talisha's pants. He was never very good at undressing her.

"We do," Talisha said, but she changed the pattern to little white daisies on a field of blue. It was easy, like playing the flute or piano or something.

Ricky unbuckled the harness on the car seat and slid Talisha's pants over her hips **and hefted the baby. "Ready for the tour?" he said.**

"Ed." Talisha held out her arms for their son. "We'll call him Ed." ○

—for Janis Ian

ON PRINCESSES

The Giant's Perspective:

The ones who are already pinched in at the waist
are easier to pick up
but the ones with at least a bit of a belly
have a better flavor.

The shrieking used to bother me–
I always took care of the end that had the mouth first
but I've gotten deaf with the years
so sometimes I start with the feet.

The Dragon Replies:

Now that I've made my fortune
I actually prefer a nice peasant–
saves me time picking through my droppings
for gold and jewels.
Plus I've developed an allergy to silk
and a rough tunic adds a bit of fiber to my diet.
A youngish peasant,
just after the harvest season–aah.

And another benefit,
I can eat thirty or forty peasants
before a knight shows up.
With princesses the ratio
is pretty much one to one.

–Laurel Winter

Illustration by June Levine

ARABIAN WINE

Gregory Feeley

Gregory Feeley is best known for his novellas, which have been widely anthologized. A new one, "Giliad," will appear in the Tor anthology *The First Heroes,* edited by Harry Turtledove and Noreen Doyle. The book will be out in May. Mr. Feeley is now writing a long novel about the waning of medieval magic.

Matteo could feel the pressure rising, as though one of his sensible organs (in addition to much of his fortune and more of his honor) lay within the rapidly heating vessel. A seam creaked loudly and the young trader flinched, recalling a weaker model that had blown open, spraying Gaspare and an assistant with scalding water. He wished he had calmed his nerves with a cup of caofa, the elixir that brought fixity of purpose and clarity of mind, and which held the balance of his fortune in pawn.

Another joint groaned, but Senator Domenico remained impassive. His secretary, who seemed to know more, looked as though he wanted to step back. The sides of the great kettle had visibly distended, a tin boy popping his cheeks. Matteo glanced worriedly at Gaspare, but the engineer seemed to be counting, as though trying to determine the proper interval in a recipe. Finally he stepped forward and upended a bucket of water over the kettle. A cloud of steam immediately enveloped him.

"As the vessel cools, the steam within will now condense," Matteo announced. Gaspare got down on his knees and, holding a pair of long tongs, laboriously turned a valve under the kettle. A deep gurgling rose from beneath the wooden floorboards.

". . . And the water is drawn up from the level below." Matteo strove to keep his voice confident and assured. The kettle, which had dimpled inward, bunged back to convexity with a faint gong.

Gaspare, who was still crouched at the base of the kettle, now spoke. "In a more efficient model, the water used to cool the vessel—now warmed—would be poured into a second vessel, which would then be heated in its turn. In this manner the coals would do continuous work, and the flow of water proceed uninterrupted."

The senator spoke. "And your vessel is now filled with. . . ?"

"Let me show you." Gaspare stood, brushing dirt from his knees. A

brass spigot emerged from the lower half of the vessel, and he carefully turned it, then stepped back as brown water spurted into his bucket. The stench that rose from it was unmistakable: the vile bilge, compounded of offal and decomposing vegetable matter, that eddied at low tide in the canals and seeped into the foundations of buildings. "It's only about a quarter full," Gaspare admitted. "The engine's capacity is limited by the tank's size and, especially, its strength. A large, double-vessel engine, of strong bronze—"

"Yes; I comprehend your point." The senator walked slowly around the apparatus, his expression betraying no sign of censure or approval. "And this is *your* invention?"

"The principle is ancient," said Gaspare cheerfully. "Hero of Alexandria showed how water displaced by steam could be made to do work. More recent studies by the Neapolitan della Porta suggested that with superior metallurgy—"

"I see. What do you think, Enrico?" he asked.

The secretary, an unsmiling man with a partially grown out tonsure that gave him the look of an expelled monk, pursed his lips. "I count ten briquettes of coal expended," he said in a nasal voice. "A considerable expense for the raising of eight gallons of water."

Matteo was about to protest the obvious injustice—the coals were not yet consumed, and another vessel could be heated—but the senator waved him off.

"It is perhaps not the most economical means of pumping," he said. "Yet the work could be done at any hour, and while haulage requires strong men, the boiler could be tended by a cripple. More to the point, there is perhaps value in a system that can drain a basement without the need to admit workmen below."

Matteo did not follow that, but the secretary nodded. Ser Domenico gathered his cloak and looked around him. "This warehouse belongs to your family?"

"It does, sir."

Domenico smiled faintly. "Its empty space stands ready to receive shipments of that bean you think to sell to Christendom, the one the Turks use to brew that bitter liquid—what do they call it?"

"They call it 'Arabian wine,' ser," Matteo replied. "Our warehouse stands ready to receive shipments of anything my father and brothers bring into port."

"Very good. Still, it hardly seems secure enough for investigations of potential benefit to our Republic. Until you dismantle your present model, I will post a guard around it."

Matteo inclined his head politely.

"You promise better performance with a sturdier engine? Very well. Have young Treviso come see me tomorrow."

"As you wish, ser." Matteo bowed, uncertain how to greet this. He was disappointed that the senator would discuss funding with Gaspare, who was a wretched negotiator. Still, for a trading family to win subsidy for a venture gave Matteo a thrill of triumph such as Gaspare—whose father had always been employed by the state—would never understand.

With brief but ceremonious leave-taking (and a sour look from his secretary) the senator departed, and the two young men looked at each other. Matteo was too well schooled to show his feelings even in the aftermath of a transaction, but Gaspare pushed his hair back, smudging his face, and grinned. "Have you any of your wondrous elixir?" he asked. "I believe this calls for a drink."

They repaired to the workbench, where Matteo produced a leather bag from his belt. "Roasted this morning," he said as he unlaced its neck, releasing the intoxicating aroma. Matteo ground the beans in a mortar while Gaspare flushed out the vessel and poured in fresh water, then carefully took out the tiny sieve—gold leaf hammered to paper thinness and riddled with needle-sized holes—that represented his own contribution to the art of brewing caofa. He doubted his countrymen would ever drink it as the Turks did, with suspended grounds settling into a sludge at the bottom of their cup.

Spooning the black powder into the sieve, Matteo called out, "Ready?" He carefully fit the sieve into the throat of a flask, and turned to Gaspare, who was bent over the vessel like a chymist before his alembic. "It's ready," he murmured. Matteo positioned the flask just beneath the spigot, and Gaspare turned the tap.

The jet of steam caught them both by surprise. Gaspare, who should have closed the valve instantly, continued to twist for a second longer, then froze. Matteo felt the flask buck in his hand as though trying to kick free. Instinctively he resisted the force pushing it away from the spigot, and immediately got himself a blast in the face.

Both men were cursing and spitting as the cloud dissipated. Matteo blinked, tasting grit on his lips, and looked down to see his doublet spattered with grounds.

"Sorry," Gaspare muttered. "I forgot that there was still water in the boiler."

Neither man cared to say aloud that they had narrowly missed a nasty accident. Matteo knew that beneath his nervous relief a blister of shame was rising. And on top of that, they had ruined a pot of caofa.

The flask was still dangling in his hand. Matteo lifted it, felt it slosh a bit, then pulled out the sieve and peered in. The residue at the bottom looked black as ink.

Grimacing, he poured it into one of the cups they had set out. Gaspare stared at the opaque liquid, leaned forward, and sniffed. Then he raised the cup to his lips and sipped.

"Say," he said in surprise, "this isn't bad."

The morning shadows had retreated from the Canale di San Salvatore by the time Matteo and Gaspare emerged, and sunlight shone upon the bobbing trash and green-tinged spume of its waters. Gaspare climbed into one of the gondoli lining the quay and directed it to the Arsenal, while Matteo turned and began to make his way toward the Rialto. Holding together the edges of his cape to cover his stained doublet, he moved swiftly through the narrow *calle,* threading between the servants on errands, the lunching workers, the loitering poor, and the jostling, swaggering

bravi, Italian and foreign, who filled the *piazzi* and *campielli* of *La serenissima,* city of St. Mark, the holy and Most Serene Republic of Venice.

One of the *bocche di leone,* its mouth gaping like the spout of a disused fountain, stood at the edge of a small square, ready to swallow proffered notes. Matteo watched a red-haired sailor approach and peer into it. As a child he had listened in awe to stories of how citizens would wake one morning to see bodies dangling by a foot from the gibbet between the two columns of the Piazzetta: enemies of the state, denounced by informers or anonymous letters and executed by the Council of Ten. Nothing so public had taken place in Matteo's memory, but it was reassuring to see that the *leoni* still held the power to impress foreigners, especially in these beleaguered days of the Republic's slow decay.

He found Selim at a café near the Ponte di Rialto, almost within sight of the bridge. There was nothing on the table in front of him, for of course he could not have wine or ale; and Matteo realized in a flash what the old man would like.

"My friend," he said, and the two men engaged in an elaborate greeting that partook, if imperfectly, of the etiquettes of both their nations. In courtesy and deference Matteo spoke Arabic, though his trader's Turkish was better. If the wizened Cairene was pained by the sound of his native tongue in Matteo's mouth, he did not show it.

"Boy!" Matteo called. "Bring a pitcher of hot water, near boiling." And as he brought forth the sack of beans Matteo saw comprehension light the man's face. He called for a mortar and pestle, which had to be procured from a better establishment down the street, then ground the caofa with animation, enjoying the bemused glances of passersby.

"Someday," he said in a clear voice (in Italian), "All Venice will sip *kahveh* as they sit along the Grand Canal."

Selim laughed quietly. "You will convert first your countrymen, then Europe? I shall never want for a cup again."

"You will not today, in any event." Matteo was inspecting his grounds as the steaming pitcher arrived, and both men leaned forward as he tipped the powder in. The aroma began to spread through the air at once, and they sighed.

"Venice remains Europe's crossroads for the spice trade," said Matteo, speaking more in bravado than truth, "and when its great cities begin to drink *kahveh,* they shall flavor it with spices brought by Venetians." In a confidential tone he added, "My sister will only drink it when I put in honey."

Selim grunted. "But Venice is the most Levantine port in Christendom," he noted. "Some of your customs will encounter resistance elsewhere." And as if led on by that reflection, he pointed at the Ponte di Rialto. "Is that one of the bridges where your city conducts its *battagliole?*"

"Oh, no," replied Matteo, shocked. "The Rialto is public territory, the heart of the Republic. The *pugni* who engage in bridge battles would never bring such disorder here; the traditional *ponti di guerre* all lie far from the city center." He reflected that Selim, whose culture embraced practices of breathtaking barbarism, might think the same of Venice's

battagliole sui ponti, which aroused such fascination and misunderstanding.

Selim nodded equably. "Some of your customs will encounter resistance," he repeated. "You have traveled farther in the lands of the Faithful than in your own, but you will see what I mean when you visit Barcelona and Lisbon. I am sorry; have I said something wrong?"

Water splashes against stone at every homeward turning, a seemingly friendly sound whose familiarity disguises its jeers. What type of knowledge can be apprehended not by learning, but only through exposure to time and the world's elements, like a weathering rock?

Vendors shouted the names of their wares, much of which the Benvenetos had, lately or in Matteo's youth, imported from throughout the Mediterranean. He had been twenty-one on his first voyage—older than Alessandro and Tullio had been, but trading ships take months to complete a journey, and the family was shrewd enough not to send him on a trip that would teach him little. Marina was three months pregnant and Matteo was in danger of becoming a father before he had left his home. With a cargo of fine Venetian textiles and refined sugar, the *Volpe d'Oro* sailed into the Adriatic, bound east for the trading-posts of the Levant.

For the first days Matteo was seasick almost continually, to the amusement of the crew and his own burning shame. The ceaselessness of the *Volpe*'s pitch and plunge wore at him: unable to find even an hour's respite to recover his energies, Matteo could keep nothing down, found it impossible to maintain his balance, and felt the ship's unnatural motions—irreconcilable with any human cycle—begin to ravage him. By the time the Levanter rose, blowing steadily out of the Holy Land like a *djinn* repelling Crusaders, Matteo had sunk into a stupor.

He never knew whether the captain decided to make for Alexandria rather than Beirut out of concern that his passenger might die. Their goods could doubtless be sold there, but it was in the eastern ports that the Venetians hoped to obtain the spices, silks, dyes, and drugs that could most profitably be sold in the landlocked markets of Austria. Matteo was carried insensibly ashore, and awoke days later in a strange bed. By the time he had recovered enough to sit up, the *Volpe d'Oro* had departed.

Too weak to travel, Matteo wrote to his family explaining that a fever had laid him up while the ship had continued on. It was one of the hazards of the business. The cargo had been consigned by the Benvenetos' business associates, and the decisions regarding what wares to take on and carry east—for which Matteo had been trained and entrusted—had been made for him.

A month later he descended the inn's narrow stairs and emerged shakily into the streets of Alexandria. Sunlight blazed downward like a hammered spike, and the flashing white of the natives' robes hurt his eyes. Matteo felt his sinuses parch and his lips crack in the desiccated air, and he wondered whether the women veiled their faces to preserve their breath's moisture.

So he drank, to keep from splitting like parchment. No wine, of course: rather fruit juice and goat's milk, cloudy infusions of dates and raisins

called *nabidh,* and a black substance, hotter than any *nabidh,* which Ibrahim called *kahveh*. The scalding liquid burnt Matteo's lips and offered no relief from the day's heat; but afterward he felt a strange rush to his head, like a spray of water sluicing grime from a window.

"Is this the effect of *kahveh?*" he asked.

Ibrahim laughed. "*Markaha!*" he cried. It meant, Matteo learned later, the peculiar ecstasy of *kahveh*.

Matteo could only walk about for an hour or two before exhaustion overtook him. Sitting for most of his day, he resolved to learn the local Arabic. It did not take him long to realize that *kahveh* (which Ibrahim served during the lessons) concentrated his mental powers; and when he learned to drink it hot he discovered that the freshest brew possessed surprising subtleties of flavor. He visited marketplace stalls where he could watch the *kahveh* seller prepare a fresh pot. "I grind them up, so," the man said, pointing to a spice mill. "Ah, you would like to see?" Smiling, he poured a dozen beans into Matteo's palm.

Matteo studied them closely. They were a glossy brown, dry to the touch. He raised them to his face and caught a faint whiff of the familiar aroma.

"They blacken when roasted," the Musselman said, "but you will never see them green. The beans are boiled before they leave Yemen. So if you were hoping to grow your own plants—" He cackled gleefully.

"I am a merchant, not a farmer," Matteo replied with distaste. In fact the possibility of cultivating the crop had never occurred to him. It should have, however: the Dutch would certainly have thought of it. He would have to think better—think differently—if he was going to find a way out of the box that was slowly enclosing his city.

In September a sirocco blew out of Africa, and a Venetian galleass made ready to run for the Adriatic. Matteo was as fit for a sea voyage as he would ever be, and he joined the traders returning home with their goods and their profits.

The *Tarida,* wind in her sails, cut swiftly through the waves, and Matteo fought the nausea rising within him. Like a defender hoping to conserve his stores until reinforcement, he gave ground slowly, walking the decks to escape the bad air below, lying down only when exhausted in the hopes of promoting sound sleep. The *Tarida* entered the Adriatic before he finally collapsed.

The captain, reluctant to return a dead merchant to his family, called over a Candian sailor with reputed skills as a herbalist, who prepared infusions of *dictamus* and shook his head. When he learned the contents of Matteo's sacks below, however, he brought beans up and brewed *kahveh* on the deck, administering sips every hour. Matteo lost weight steadily, but never fell senseless; he was conscious and despairing when the ship entered the lagoon.

Matteo had been gone for ten months. He returned, broken and defeated, to find that his intended maiden journey had returned (with moderate success); the Dutch had effectively cut off the flow of spices from the Moluccas; and Marina had died in June of childbed fever, four days after giving birth to a stillborn son.

* * *

The streets below the Piazza San Marco were quiet; a gentleman in grey trailing behind him was the only other soul in sight as he turned toward the campanile of St. Mark's, still tinted with sunlight on its upper reaches. When he stepped through the nondescript building's west entrance a guard obliged him to produce the letter attesting that Messer Matteo Benveneto was granted entry to the Archivio dei Documenti. He was escorted to the third floor, where Scipio himself answered the guard's knock.

"Ser Benveneto," he said, his voice no more unwelcome or suspicious than usual. "You are here late." He opened the door far enough to admit him.

"I wished to return these volumes," Matteo replied. "It was most gracious of the senator to permit me to take them away."

"It is not the library's policy to permit works to be removed from the building," Scipio observed, taking the volumes from Matteo and inspecting them closely. "Senator Domenico's request on your behalf was quite exceptional." Matteo had hoped to find him gone at this hour, but the librarian seemed to live in these rooms.

The library had lost some of the wonder it had held for Matteo upon his first admission, but he still felt a tremor of excitement as he looked from one book-lined wall to the next. Most of the volumes were relatively dull—reports by diplomats and informers, dating back decades, describing in detail the battlements and garrisons of various cities—but their very numbers seemed to compel interest, as though they had been compressed, like charcoal, into a form ready to ignite. "Do you have writings on *qahwa?*" he asked politely

"*Qahwa?*" the librarian asked, frowning. "The shrub Arabs use to make medicine?"

"The drink made from a bean, yes."

Scipio scowled and turned to open a large ledger on his desk. "You will have to return tomorrow," he said over his shoulder.

Matteo had hoped he would be invited to stay while the librarian went off to find the volumes, but he merely nodded and thanked the man again. It was growing dark as he descended the stairs; even the broad lanes were filling with shadow. Matteo walked unaccosted, conscious that this was not his part of town. By the time he reached Franchescina's street it was twilight, smells of cooking wafted through open windows, and the only other pedestrians were swathed in the grey that cats adopt at night.

"I expected you earlier," she said upon admitting him. "I hope you ate."

He had not, and the thought that a cold chicken breast might await him had cheered his long walk. He kissed her, to show how little he cared about food, and asked how her day had been.

"Trying," she replied with a sigh. "People come to see me, they don't know what they want, so become impatient that I cannot at once give it to them."

"Give them something finer than what they think they want." Matteo strode into the dining room and spilled a handful of beans onto the table.

"From a shipment that arrived three days ago. They are much superior to the last ones."

He had expected her to require persuading of the beans' significance, but Franchescina exclaimed as though he had poured out jewels. "They're lovely!" she cried, stepping forward to pick up several. "I'll get the mortar." She went into the kitchen, where he heard her telling Paola to boil water. Smiling, she returned with the set he had given her for grinding spices and sat down across from him. She poured the beans into the bowl, letting them click, then bore the pestle down with a crunch. Matteo watched bemusedly as she applied herself, as though grinding caofa beans before one's lover was a skill known to every courtesan.

"Do you remember how to make it?" he asked. She flashed him that knowing smile that urged him not to be foolish. Of course, she had watched him prepare the caofa he had served her once and had memorized the steps of its preparation, which she recognized as better suited to her. Deftly she reduced the fragments to powder; perhaps she wished to demonstrate her wrist action. A rich aroma spread through the room.

"It is too bad," he said casually, "that the beans have all been roasted, preventing any buyer from growing his own." Franchescina had no reaction to this. He had seen her slip a half dozen beans into her sleeve, and was glad to see she was not contemplating betrayal.

Paola brought out the water, and Matteo produced his golden sieve, at which Franchescina's eyes opened wide. "Not a present, alas," he said as he passed it over. The servant stared as Franchescina tipped in the caofa and poured the steaming water. "Do you recognize this, Paola?" he asked. "It is caofa, an eastern drink sometimes used as a medicine. But it is beneficial to the healthy as much as the ailing, and delicious besides." The old woman was doubtless as great a gossip as her mistress.

Solids sublime only slowly, heated fluids faster. Sliding between the silk sheets Matteo had bought her, Franchescina snuggled against him, her belly radiating warmth as though from fires within. Matteo could feel her drying upon him, the vapors escaping from beneath the sheet he had pulled up to perfume the air around his face. Would the essence of caofa now running through her veins tincture her perspiration and other liquids? It was an interesting question, too subtle for Gaspare with his hydraulics and pressures to answer.

As though thinking along parallel lines, Franchescina whispered: "Do the scholars at the university study caofa's effect on the humors?"

"How should I know? I just trade for goods."

"You said you were going there soon, to consult their library."

"That was—" That was to investigate the design of steam engines, which Matteo was now enjoined from discussing. When had he let that slip? "That was another matter."

"I thought you wanted to study rising fluids."

Matteo wondered what the hell he had said. Franchescina knew no more about humors or sublimation than he did; she merely possessed the facility to chat with seeming knowledge about anything. He decided to speak less hereafter of his plans for caofa, and not at all about steam.

"My fluids are rising already," he said. "Come here."

* * *

Matteo sat reading in his father's study, and later, when he could venture out, in the libraries of his father's friends. He did not know how many doors had been opened by pity; it was not a question he was yet strong enough to face. What he did know was that traders bought cheap and sold dear, preferably goods that they alone controlled. And that with Venetians' profits slashed nearly to nothing, what the Benvenetos needed was something wondrous to corner.

Even as he paged through folios of unreliable Ottoman histories, Matteo knew that it was *qahwa*, which had soothed his nausea and preserved his life, that was to be his miracle import. The references he found were all in the tales of travelers, as though word of caofa had repeatedly washed to shore but never lodged on land. Belli spoke of "*cave*," while an Augsburg botanist who had visited Jerusalem mentioned the drinking of "kahveh" and a Dutch volume called *Linschooten's Travels* included a reference to "chaoua." Had none of these men bothered to taste it?

Matteo served it to his family, his father's colleagues, his mother's friends. He adulterated its essence with milk, with honey, with wine (a poor idea), with brandy (better). He sprinkled fine grounds upon pastry. He exhausted his supply and sent to Alexandria for more, at considerable expense. Eventually he persuaded some few dozen acquaintances that caofa was a pleasing curiosity.

"Do you hope to sell caofa to the Venetians?" asked his father, amused. "Should our fellow citizens develop a taste for it, they will surely procure their own."

"I hope to sell caofa to Europe," Matteo replied. "All Venice should harbor such hopes. Do we control tobacco, pepper, saffron? Do we sell anything others cannot?" *Do we wish to become great again?* he wanted to ask, but dared not.

It was at a masque that a young man Matteo's own age approached and asked whether he had seen any "steaming engines" during his months in Alexandria. Surprised, Matteo described a brass serpent that would flap wings when the kettle within it boiled. The man nodded, yes that was the principle, and showed disappointment when Matteo said that he had seen nothing larger. There were reports, Gaspare Treviso explained, of tiny carriages that would roll forward when a brazier in their vitals was kindled and similar playthings. Nowhere, however, had anyone built a machine that harnessed the expansive force of steam to perform real work.

"The ancients designed such engines, but any that were built are now lost. Have the sultan's engineers constructed their like, or learned of others who have? I fear the Turks' wealth and long reach."

Matteo welcomed the Turks' wealth and long reach: they gathered in the goods that Venetians could sell to Europe. He listened, politely but without sympathy, as the young man spoke of engines that piped water to foundries or drained mines more efficiently than hand-worked pumps or bucket winches. He gravely agreed that Turkish builders were formidable, and showed him his caofa mill, whose gears were machined to clockwork precision yet could withstand the resistance of caofa beans be-

ing crushed. Gaspare studied the mechanism and agreed gloomily that Venetian craftsmen could only produce such workmanship at prohibitive expense.

Several days later Matteo received a letter from the Arsenal, where Treviso worked alongside his father in the bronze foundry. The engineer inquired whether Matteo would be willing to come examine something "interesting" in two days' time. Mystified, Matteo wrote back agreeing to accompany him.

Gaspare arrived dressed nearly as well as Matteo, and seemed somber in a manner he had not seemed before. The engineer conducted him not to the Arsenal (where the trader had expected to be shown some improved milling device) but instead to an anonymous building within sight of St. Mark's, where two guards challenged them as soon as they approached. It was only after much scrutiny, especially of the letter Gaspare produced, that they were at length admitted.

"What was that you gave them?" he whispered after the guards shut the door behind them.

"A letter of passage," Gaspare replied softly as a new pair of guards approached. "I have another for Ser Scipio upstairs." As they were escorted up the stairs, he added: "Don't say anything."

And so Matteo was admitted to the library that had no name, which occupied the third floor (and perhaps more) of the blandly titled Archivio dei Documenti, itself inaccessible without sanction from an authority greater than the city's large bureaucracy contained. The letters, documents, and manuscripts came (Gaspare told him) from every corner of the Mohammedan world, including lands like Spain and Sicily, which the Infidels had once conquered and might yet again.

Matteo spent two afternoons reading through Arabian treatises and copying out what they had to say about steam-driven engines. He had no reason to help young Treviso, but the entree the bumptious young builder enjoyed to this secret trove must mean something, and access through ports was what all traders craved. The letter that Matteo had been given to show Scipio he retained (although his notes had to stay in the library, where they gave signs of being handled in his absence), and the name of Senator Domenico was on it. Matteo was willing enough to do a favor for a man with such friends.

Gaspare invited him to dinner and thanked him for the report, which had evidently become part of the library's holdings. "Most of what you found was ancient knowledge," he admitted. "That fellow Hero lived as long ago as Our Lord."

"I am sorry I could not find you anything," Matteo replied courteously.

"If the Turks have been building steam devices, I want to know of it," said Gaspare, who paused to study the hinge of a mussel he had just opened. "But if they turn out to know nothing, all the better.

"Hero's book was called *Pneumatica,*" he added after swallowing, "and I have asked that the University at Padua be requested to send its copy. I don't suppose you read Greek?"

"Not even the Greek of today," Matteo admitted. "If you deal with officials in Athens, you speak Turkish."

Gaspare suddenly grinned. "I bet you do not even read Latin," he said. "Of course not: it is the language of science, not trade." He stood and brought over two leather-bound volumes. "Nice to see a proper-looking book, eh? Take a look at them."

Matteo, who had been wondering what gift of Gaspare's had so impressed the Republic's leaders that he was given the power to summon books from one city to another, took the folios in hand. They were *De Medicina Aegyptorum* and *De Plantis Aegypti Liber,* by one Alpinus. Opening the cover, he found a note, written in a strong Italian hand, disclosing that the author was actually Prospero Alpini, a Venetian physician and botanist who had traveled to Egypt in 1580. Was that what librarians did, inform on authors?

"Here, turn to the marked page," said Gaspare, leaning across the table to flip the top volume open. Matteo found himself looking at an illustration of a small tree.

"This is a caofa shrub?" he guessed.

"Oh, you've never seen one? I assumed they were cultivated locally. Yes, each book contains a discussion of 'caova,' as he calls it. They are part of the University Library at Padua; I briefly have their loan." And Gaspare explained how his investigations came to enjoy such support. The tale involved a drawing seen during his schooldays and long remembered, of a device that spun and flung jets of steam; and a tale about an ill-soldered pot that had been used in a nobleman's kitchen to boil water: the lid had become fixed fast, and—when a scullion bent over it to wonder why no steam was escaping—blew up with enough force to maim.

This led young Gaspare to wonder whether steam could serve in place of gunpowder. Although the gun he built was unwieldy and temperamental, it did propel a bullet through a wall. When Gaspare expressed concern that the engineers of the Sublime Porte might turn their fearsome ingenuity to exploiting this power, he was quietly granted permission to consult an archive on such matters.

Matteo was impressed with Gaspare's ability to win government support for his project. It didn't sound as if this included financial assistance, but Matteo knew he could complete that next step. "You plainly possess the knowledge to do great things," he said. "But will you profit from this asset, or shall the Senate and *burocrazie* relieve you of your treasure, as a trader would fleece a foolish seller?"

Later that night, after hours of talk and brandy, Matteo drew up a partnership agreement, formalizing their conjoined efforts to develop engines and other devices powered by steam and to profit thereby. Gaspare, who received wages for his work in defense of the Republic, had not thought how he might protect his own interests, which seemed to him one with his city's. He read over the agreement, which Matteo had set down in the standard wording, and frowned indecisively.

"Of course you should not sign it until you have discussed matters with your lawyer," Matteo told him. Abruptly he pulled over the agreement and signed it himself. "There," he said. "Now I am bound by this; until you sign, you are not." And he returned the sheet and sat back.

He knew without thinking that Gaspare would now honor the contract,

and stood to raise his goblet. "Like steam, may we expand and be felt!" The two men drank ceremoniously and hurled their cups to the floor. Then, to drive the fumes from their heads, they brewed and drank a pot of caofa.

The *Argo* came through the lagoon with its sails snapping, as if to advertise its disdain of rowers. Though one of a dozen ships to reach the city that morning, it was recognized by a harbormaster's boy, and Matteo got word as he was finishing breakfast. He was at the quay before the inspectors and tariff assessors were through, and stood waiting to greet the captain as soon as he stepped off.

"Welcome back, Captain," he said, leaning out to extend the old man a hand. "A happy voyage, I hope."

"Happy for those who stand at its conclusion with their hands open," he muttered, a bit ungraciously. He grasped Matteo's wrist and pulled himself up onto the pier, then squinted at him. "Messer Benveneto. Your family will have no reason to curse, if I remember rightly."

"Thanks, Captain," said Matteo with a bow. "The ship's manifest. . . ?"

"Is in the hands of the purser." They were walking toward the harbormaster's office, where the captain would have to go through various formalities before he could have breakfast. He looked up the quay, as if expecting more traders come to ask after their goods.

Then, as if recalling something odd, he added: "You got several sacks of beans."

There were more important shipments expected than this, but Matteo was inordinately pleased by the news. He wished the captain good morning and sent one of his boys to alert the warehouse that a ship was in. He returned to the office and was checking receipts when Gaspare appeared.

"We have a site," he said briskly as he came through the door. Matteo stared at him. "A building," Gaspare explained when he noticed the expression. "Where they want us to build a steam-driven engine. We're to inspect it this morning."

"Gaspare, I have a ship just in. I'm going to be busy all day."

The engineer blinked, as if startled at not being understood. "They want us there this morning; other times are no good. They seemed reluctant even to tell me where the building is."

Matteo tried to control his exasperation. "Gaspare, that's nonsense. They want us to make measurements, they let us visit the site. Where are we building, in a contessa's boudoir?"

"I don't know," Gaspare said seriously. "They eventually gave me a map, but it lacks some important information, which they would only tell me. Are new inventions kept in secret locations?"

Matteo looked at him bemusedly. It had occurred to him that he could spare the next two hours, before the goods were unloaded and had to be watched. Certainly Gaspare could take a man and carry out the measurements himself, but a shrewder head should also be present.

Sitting across from Gaspare in the gondola a few minutes later, he studied their scribbled route, which was indeed incomprehensible if one did not know its point of origin, and difficult to reconcile with the city's layout if one did. We're not being told overmuch, he thought.

Three men stood silently at the dock where they debarked. They took Gaspare's map and led the young men through a narrow street that saw little traffic, into an alley separating the back fences of unfamiliar buildings, and finally through the servants' entrance of an anonymous brick pile that Matteo doubted he would recognize from the street.

Inside stood Senator Domenico's secretary, who led them down the corridor into a windowless room, which he indicated was the space they should measure. "You want us to install the engine here?" Gaspare asked. He stamped the tiled floor, inquired about its load bearing capacity, then explained that he would have to drill a hole through the floor to drop the plumb line through. The secretary muttered a word to one of the guards, who returned a moment later with a wooden toolbox.

"So when was this house built?" asked Gaspare amiably as he chiseled into a tile and then applied the drill. No one answered, and when he finally drove the bit through the wood and into the void below, he sang out the floor's thickness, which Matteo wrote down. Men watched silently as he took out a lead bob on a string and lowered it through the hole, ear held close as he listened for the click.

Matteo looked idly about the room, which had water-stained walls and lamps too dim to read by. He had concluded it wasn't a private home, and decided now that it was some government building, where petty bureaucrats would come in to study their engine and measure its achievement. Perhaps new devices, not yet ready for production, were tested or stored here. Matteo thought suddenly of the university, and scribbled *8-10 beans/sack?* in his notebook. One of the men saw him writing when Gaspare had not called out a number and frowned.

"Got it," Gaspare said, and pulled up his string, laid it along the floor, and counted its length in tiles, which he reported to Matteo. With a practiced motion Matteo placed the toe of his boot against a tile to establish its length, which he multiplied by Gaspare's figure and wrote down. It was a tradesman's trick, the kind shopkeepers use to take quick measure, but the secretary seemed to dislike him already, so Matteo didn't care.

"Time to go downstairs," Gaspare announced. He lowered the bob back down the hole to its previous extent, weighted the string with a loose tile, then stood brushing his hands. The guards glanced at each other, but the secretary led them silently from the room. They descended a steep stair into darkness, whose chill breath wafted the taste of standing water, wood rot, and something organic that didn't get the chance to blow away.

"Watch your step," Matteo called back to Gaspare, a warning that the secretary had not offered him. The final stair was a different height than the rest, which was hard to anticipate in the near darkness. Save for the candle the secretary carried, the basement was black as a crypt, and the wavering light barely reached the packed earth floor.

The secretary stopped and turned. "Here," he said, holding out his candle. Matteo could see a plastered wall and some rough stones underfoot, but the ceiling was invisible, save the tiny hole Gaspare had drilled. "Is this the basement's lowest point?" Gaspare asked as he examined the floor. "That's the place to drain." Matteo was studying the high-water marks on the wall, the most recent of which appeared to be a few inches up.

With their measurements completed the secretary plainly wanted them gone, but the two men lingered, looking about for things they should note. Gaspare scuffed at the floor, remarking that it could be raked to present its lowest point where the pipe opened, while Matteo inquired about the basement's square footage. Eventually they were herded back up the stairs, where Matteo banged his head against a low beam and Gaspare laughed. "It would have hurt more if the wood hadn't been rotten," he retorted.

Outside they were taken away by a different route than they had come, and conducted through numerous turns before being deposited in a covered gondola. "I don't think they want us back," Matteo observed. "Do they expect us to build the engine elsewhere?"

Allowed at last to disembark, the engine-makers grinned at each other and made ironical gestures: something to talk about when there is time. Matteo had a cargo to protect from being nibbled away, while Gaspare had to hasten back to the Arsenal and other deadlines. "Are we still for Padua?" Gaspare asked.

"On Thursday we are for Padua," Matteo assured him; and repeated it to Franchescina that night. "Why ever are you going there?" she asked.

"Beans," he said, and laughed. Worldly as she was, and somewhat mercenary, she had never heard that mainland term for money.

"Does Ser Treviso travel for beans?" she asked mockingly.

"Gaspare travels to learn how to build a better engine," he replied. "Do you know what he calls his present model? A *succhiatore*."

Lying back on his pillow, Matteo imagined the fragrance of caofa ascending through the caverns of his sinuses, each wisp slipping through keyholes and causing thick doors to swing open. Sex drains the loins as wine feeds the blood, but caofa opens the mind to the vibrancy of the world beyond, where a man strides free in the brightening tones of dawn, remembered even as reason and the body compose themselves for sleep.

Padua had been Venice's for two hundred years, but the city was freely given, and did not comport itself like a possession. It was dark before the travelers arrived, after a day spent crossing the lagoon and being rowed upriver, and Matteo directed his servant to find a good inn. "And not one with students in it," warned Gaspare, who had been here before.

Matteo slept in a strange bed, as traders do, and breakfasted with Gaspare before they separated, bound for different parts of town. He asked directions for the Department of Botany, and walked along a surprisingly uncrowded road following the river (it could not be mistaken for a canal). In the distance, waving faintly like an unexpected memory, was a row of palm trees.

"It was as a physician that I accompanied the Consul," the director explained with a deprecating gesture, as though this admission came somehow at his expense. "The fact that I held the Chair in Botany was of no concern to the Venetian government, which was worried only about its consulate being poisoned by foreign doctors. The university was happy to authorize funding for the collection of samples, although—" he laughed

and gestured at the botanical garden around them— "I ended by exceeding my budget several times over."

"I can well imagine," said Matteo. The image of a Venetian trading vessel entering the lagoon, its deck a swaying oasis of potted palms, shrubs, and citrus trees, seemed a very allegory of collector's extravagance. Perhaps Alpini was allowed to return some on the consular galley, though Matteo doubted it.

"Your letter spoke of an interesting project," Alpini said. "You look to be a man of business, not a scholar. Pray tell me what your own travels to Egypt have produced, that you believe I could be of some help to you."

Matteo took out his leather bag. "Do you recognize these?" he asked, pouring a handful of green beans into Alpini's hand.

The director studied them closely. "I suppose they are Egyptian? They look like . . . heavens, they look like the berries of the caova tree." He shook his head, smiling. "I saw one in Cairo, but it rarely flowered. The caova really only flourishes in southern Arabia, in the highlands. That's where these seeds must have originated, to reach this nice size. The natives roast them and make a hot drink of it."

"Indeed." The two men had settled on a bench beside the path, where Alpini was turning over the beans in his palm. "Do you think you could grow them?"

"These seeds? I never succeeded in Egypt." He prodded a particularly large one with his finger. "I wouldn't mind trying again, though."

"I have twelve sacks of them," Matteo said. "Perhaps one was hurried through the scalding process." He opened his wallet and pulled out a dozen tiny twists of paper, which rattled slightly. "All we need are a few beans—even one—that were not heated enough."

"In the wrong climate or soil, the tree will not flower," Alpini warned. "But if there is still life in these seeds, I shall bring it forth." He shook the packets lightly, as though anxious to open them. "Did you travel extensively in Egypt? I could not: the Consul remained in Cairo, and me perforce with him." They were walking toward the garden gates and the botanical building beyond, where Alpini wanted to show the beans to his students. "Do you get there often?"

The Palazzo Communale stood on Padua's main square, built at the Republic's expense so that "Venetian and Paduan men of good will might meet and converse together to increase their mutual love and trust." Many of the afternoon's occupants appeared to be students, neither Venetian nor Paduan (the famous university attracted scholars from throughout Europe) nor, to Matteo's jaded eye, men of good will, either.

This did not matter, for students were as ready to relish pleasures as more sensible men—and probably faster to speak of them afterward. The hired serving-maid smiled at everyone as she ground the beans in a pestle, to coarse comments but also looks of interest. The carafe was a fine one, and the emptiness of the cups, arranged invitingly along the long table, carried an unmistakable air of expectation.

Matteo walked among the onlookers nodding and bowing, like a

burgher at the marriage of his daughter. "From Arabia, yes," he told inquirers. "They call it caofa, the word actually means 'wine.' Because it intoxicates without stupefying, the Mohammedans' proscription against alcohol cannot touch it. Yes, Egyptians and Turks drink it black and hot, but in a moment Paolina will set out cream, honey, vanilla, and other additives, so that Christian tongues may taste it in a more becoming mode."

Men were leaning forward as Paolina poured the rich dark powder into the sieve. One by one the students sniffed, recoiled with a startled expression, then took a second, deeper breath. By the time the kettle was boiling she had attracted a considerable audience, who watched the thin stream patter over the grounds like an alchemist's disciples. Enough men were waiting that Paolina poured the cups only a quarter full, as though this were an especially select vintage. Matteo watched as they grabbed the cups and tasted, then looked at each other uncertainly as they smacked their lips or rubbed the grains against their tongues. One glanced at him, and Matteo said, "Remember your first sip of wine?"

By the time the second carafe was being served, the first drinkers were looking at each other with a dawning surmise, and the buzz of conversation grew a bit louder, the gestures more animated. Encouragements were shouted at Paolina to grind faster, and laughter broke out in small groups. A young man added cream to his cup and was roundly jeered by his fellows.

Matteo was arranging that a tray of caofa be taken to a group of older men sitting at the far side of the room when Gaspare grabbed his elbow. "I've got it!" the builder whispered.

"Got what? Have you had a cup yet? They're going fast."

"I've got the answer! Look at this." Gaspare was trying to show him something; he was flipping through the pages of a huge book. "It's called *De Re Metallica*; one of the professors told me about it. I've been in the library all day."

"Gaspare, can this wait? I've got responsibilities right now."

Gaspare looked around bemusedly. "You're hosting this? What a waste of good caofa!" He opened the folio. "In brief, it's a book about mining and smelting, which little concerns us at the Arsenal. But look at this." Gaspare pointed to a large woodcut illustration. "It is a machine for draining water from a mine—'*siphones aquam spiritu tractam*'; that is, a suction-pump. Can you see what produces the suction? It's a *pestone!*"

"A rod attached to a cylinder?" Matteo was sure that the text explained this, and felt a stab of annoyance at having to guess when Gaspare had not.

"There is a seal within the cylinder, which the rod pushes up and down. A down stroke expels the air beneath the cylinder, so that the up stroke will then produce suction. And that draws up the water!"

"Excellent." Matteo stood and waved to an older man who had just come in, a Paduan trader he knew. They were sitting in armchairs discussing river traffic when Paolina appeared with two cups, which she served as though filling an order. "Do you know this, Benito?" Matteo asked casually, then watched his colleague sniff uncertainly and sip. Another trader stopped by, and soon Matteo was invited to a dockside tav-

ern where merchants gathered at a back table at the close of day. By seven he was sitting at Grimaldi's dinner table, being regarded curiously by the trader's family.

"Could a potion consumed solely by Turks and other heathen truly be welcomed in Christian lands?" asked daughter Maria.

Matteo inclined his head politely. "Spices and fine fabrics cannot be produced in Europe, so we import them. There is nothing un-Christian about eating pepper or wearing silk."

"How much is consumed to make a cup?" asked Grimaldi's Giorgio.

"Perhaps a half cup of beans to brew a carafe," Matteo admitted.

"So you do not get hundreds of servings per pound," Grimaldi observed. "Caofa is not a precious substance, but rather a commodity, like wine or grain."

"I can see why the physicians made a medicine of it, to dispense by the spoonful," Signora Grimaldi remarked.

"Wine and grain can be very profitable," Matteo pointed out. "And caofa costs much more than either. Would you leave this market for the Dutch to pick up?"

"It is possible," Giorgio said diplomatically, "that the felicities of caofa will be appreciated most readily in the metropolises of Venice or Amsterdam, with their sophisticated and well-traveled populaces. Might it not encounter resistance in smaller cities or towns?"

Matteo wanted to reply that cinnamon and nutmeg were consumed in every household that could afford them, but Maria spoke up first. "Is it true that in Venice the carnival lasts for six months of the year?"

"Why, it may be six months from October to Lent," replied Matteo as though in surprise, "but the Arsenal builds ships, and merchants hire them, throughout the year." He wondered if every convent-taught mainland girl held such beliefs.

"But you allow brawling on the bridges during Feast Days," she said.

"The *battagliole?* But that is sport!"

"But it is true that people are sometimes killed?" asked Giorgio, sounding more intrigued than scandalized.

"They use their fists; that is why they are called *pugni*." Matteo sought to change his tone to worldly amusement. "The birds at your market day cockfights die; our pugni don't."

"Two cups of that stuff and I still feel as alert as if it were lunch time!" Grimaldi exclaimed, slapping a palm against the table. "There will be a market for it, never fear." His family nodded and smiled, and Matteo felt like a general who heard word that the first village beyond the frontier has been taken.

The men spent the rest of the evening discussing the northern trade, then Grimaldi rose with a yawn (Matteo knew how long the effects of the caofa would last) and declared that good merchants rose early. Returning from the garden fifteen minutes later, Matteo encountered Giorgio in a darkened corridor; without a word they turned and repaired to the kitchen, where Matteo ground enough caofa to send them both buzzing like hives. The evening ended with the two young men sitting on the tiled floor, brains crackling, as they plotted the invasion of the Hapsburg lands

with merchant vessels led by caofa-sharpened traders and manned by the beans themselves.

"The steam enters a cylinder and pushes the *pestone* upward," Gaspare was saying. The shoreline was flowing past them faster than yesterday, when they had been sailing upriver. "The operator continues admitting steam until the *pestone* is at the top of the cylinder. This pressure batters against its inner surface, despite being made up of very little air and water. Like little men pushing hard. Do you understand?"

"How is this an improvement on our present design?" Matteo asked.

"The steam, of course. In the *Succhiatore,* all the power to be generated by several minutes' heating is expended at once, which means it must first be concentrated in one place. Here, the steam only exerts enough pressure to push the *pestone* upward—there's no resistance except the *pestone*'s own weight, so we don't need that tremendous pressure. Don't you see?"

"It works in many little gasps, rather than a single great one?"

"Well put! It does not have to drink the sea in a single sip." Excitement seemed to have lent Gaspare a poetical turn of mind.

"We need it to work reliably," Matteo reminded him. That was the sole beauty of the homely *Succhiatore*: it was too simple to allow technical complications. Enough now to demonstrate that such engines worked; they could improve the design later.

"It's the caofa vendor!" cried a hearty voice behind him. Matteo turned to see a merchant whose face he remembered from the day before.

"Did I charge you for that cup?" he asked mildly.

"You'll charge me for the next one!" Behind his bluff grin, the man eyed Matteo appraisingly. "Have you calculated your unit costs yet?"

"That depends on whether we import by galley," Matteo replied. Renting a state-owned galley was expensive, but it greatly reduced insurance rates on the cargo.

"In Sumatra, pepper is as cheap as flour," the merchant observed. Gaspare, bored by this unpromising turn of subject, drifted off toward the bow, but Matteo took the man's meaning.

"Caofa reaches Egypt inexpensive enough that shopkeepers can drink it," he said. "Venetian demand may drive the price up, but the increased cultivation this will encourage will bring it back down. When that happens—it may take three or four years—we will see an explosion of caofa-drinking in Europe."

As soon as the boat bumped against the deck Matteo and Gaspare vaulted over the railing. It was Saturday afternoon, and workers were being hastened to complete their work before the Sabbath. Matteo bade his friend goodbye and went to the office, where he hoped to learn that an expected ship had come in. Instead he found a note from his uncle, summoning him home on family business.

Puzzled and apprehensive, he walked rapidly to Palazzo Benveneto, wondering whether an unfavorable report of his Paduan adventure had reached his father's ears. On the staircase he met Uncle Bartolomeo. "How was your voyage?" he asked. "Did your stomach tolerate the packet?"

"Scarcely a voyage, and it went well. And rivers run quite smoothly." Matteo hoped no one else would think to ask.

His uncle smiled affectionately, younger son to younger son. "Your ventures are already coming to the attention of important people."

Matteo felt a thrill of alarm. "My caofa party?"

"No, not that." Bartolomeo chuckled. "The plumbing system you want to install with young Treviso. You boys hope to become building contractors?"

Matteo paused before the door of his father's office and composed himself, then knocked. It was Alessandro's voice that called him to come in, and when he opened the door Matteo saw the two men sitting at the desk, which was spread with papers. "Ah, Matteo," said his father. "I gather your trip went well."

"He successfully disposed of his merchandise," said Alessandro dryly.

"Thank you, ser, it did," Matteo replied, ignoring his brother. "I believe that if we brought a shipment of caofa into Venice, we could sell it."

Ser Benveneto looked thoughtful, but before he could say anything, Alessandro spoke up: "Easier at least to give away beans than sell steam."

Matteo began to reply, but Ser Benveneto raised a forestalling hand. "And there is that second matter," he said. He picked up a folded sheet, which bore at its upper edge a broken Senate seal. "The secretary for Senator Domenico has written, setting out the terms by which you and your friend shall undertake to build a pump powered by the pressure of steam." He glanced over the paper at his son. "They are not generous, but I suppose it represents entree into a new market."

"A new market for what?" Alessandro asked. "Are we to supply boilers for the leaky basements of government buildings?"

"We are selling the design," Matteo, sensing that Alessandro wished to provoke him, replied calmly. "Or rather, we are not selling the design; after we demonstrate its success with the model we are being paid to build, I will apply for a letter patent."

Alessandro looked puzzled—good eldest son, he could only imagine trading in *things*—and Ser Benveneto rustled the paper. "You will have to take care if you wish to retain control of this project," he remarked. "Without physical possession, your bargaining strength is much compromised."

"What do you mean?" Matteo asked. He understood that his father, as head of the family, would have received and read any correspondence, but wished that he could now see the letter.

"The Senate evidently considers this design valuable to the state," said Ser Benveneto, with an admonitory nod at Alessandro, "and wishes it built within the security of the Arsenal."

"What? May I see that?" Matteo reached for the letter anxiously. His father handed it over, then murmured something to Alessandro, who got up and left.

Matteo read and reread the letter in bewilderment. The *sipho* would be built on the site that Messers Benveneto and Treviso had been shown; and it would be developed and assembled in a special workshop at the Arsenal. On a second reading Matteo caught a reference to *ingenium,* and realized that two pumps, the second a product of the builders' further improvisation, were to be produced.

Gaspare must have spoken of an unproved model after all, and the senator had decided to let them try to build it. Matteo read once more through the letter, at last understanding its various clauses. "This cannot be," he said at last.

"No?" asked his father, amused.

"We are not arsenalotti," he declared. "We will design the second model in our own workshop, and deliver it when complete. Do they think we are petitioning to join their work rolls?" The sum specified was moreover too small for a *Succhiatore* plus an *ingenium,* but that was a matter of bargaining.

Matteo realized how exhilarated he should be that the senate was showing interest in a model that Gaspare had merely described confidently. He looked at the second sheet, which proved to be a special *licentio* permitting him to enter the Arsenal. Glumly he put it down.

His father smiled. "If your pump proves successful, there will be recognition from the Republic, whether financial or not. You told me once that your caofa project was more for the glory of Venice than the wealth of our family." (Matteo winced; had he ever made such an unmercantile remark?) "Might your steam pump prove valuable to Venice?"

"It possesses some worth," Matteo said. "How much depends on how far the design might be improved."

"Well then," said his father, nodding, "it is good that the Republic wishes you to improve it."

This was not to the point, but Matteo had realized by now what his father was thinking. Three sons were more than the family business needed, and his father had suggested before that Matteo's gift for language and numbers might stand in good stead for government service. He did not appreciate that the Benvenetos needed a son who knew better than to follow the business practices of their father, who was reluctant to abandon the successful strategies of decades.

"If they wished, I would improve the Republic," said Matteo, and saw by his father's expression that he had gone too far; but it was true, Venice was ossifying like the deposits that encrust hulls and chains, hardening like an old man's joints. Matteo knew the malady and realized moreover the avenues to cure, for *Venice should be more like steam* and expand to press against every surface it touched; indeed in its ability to force its way into openings and run the shortest routes *Venice should be like money,* flowing instantly where value could be found and drying up where it had withered. And where money finds opportunity and nourishes it, the fruits will quicken the wits of others, even those whom they reach from far away: for Venice lives by water and wind, which carry the essence of its wealth: Matteo could not say it aloud, but yes, *Venice should be like caofa*.

The Sun hung just above the lagoon's wavering reflection, which fragmented and reformed in the vagrant breeze that accompanied sunrise. Workers were already rowing down the Rio dei Gesuidi, but Matteo recognized them as porters, artisans, and vendors. The arsenalotti all lived to the south and west, in the small closed neighborhoods that had housed the shipyard's workers for centuries.

A church bell was ringing, evidently to speed the tardy. The swart Venetian faces—there were, Matteo realized, no foreigners present—looked relaxed, unhurried. Matteo would have walked a bit faster, but did not care to draw attention to himself. Not since Alexandria had he seen a crowd where everyone was dressed alike.

He was stopped at the gate, as he had expected, but when he showed his *licentio* the guards frowned, grew more unfriendly rather than less, and pulled Matteo out of line and sat him in a small room. He was still there forty minutes later when Gaspare came in.

"Sorry about that," his colleague said. "Your papers were unfamiliar to the *portoneri,* who have sent them to their superiors. We're going to have to wait a while. Care for some breakfast?"

Gaspare led Matteo back out the gate and onto the now nearly empty Campo dell'Arsenale. "Are visitors to the Arsenal so unusual?" he asked. "Those guards acted as though I was likely a spy."

"We get visitors all the time. The Arsenal has become a tourist stop for prominent foreigners, from whom the guards expect tips. But you're Venetian, you're a trader, and you came carrying a pass from the senate, which nobody had ever seen before. These guys aren't paid to make decisions, and arsenalotti do only what they're paid to do."

Matteo saw a familiar structure near the edge of the square, one of the squat metal boxes that dotted the city, this one bearing a sign, *Denontie Secrete per L'Inquisitorie all'Arsenale,* above the slit where the denunciations would go. He raised his eyebrows. "To the Arsenal Inquisitors, not the Council of Ten?"

Gaspare spread his hands in mock modesty. "The security of *La serenissima's* shipyard demands unique precautions."

They sat at a table on a tiny square in San Martino and ordered bread and cheese. Housewives were hanging their washing twenty feet away, looking disapprovingly at Matteo's fine garb. Children's voices bounced like balls off nearby walls, and Matteo could hear women's voices from the kitchen, but the only man he saw was the one who served them.

"An arsenalotti parish, eh?" he asked.

Gaspare laughed. "San Martino? You should go out to San Pietro di Castello. Everyone looks alike!"

Matteo had no desire to be the peacock in a flock of pigeons. "When we get through the gates," he began, "we shall have to show the papers to the Patroni, for they specify that a special site be made available for the construction of our *ingenium.*"

"Our what?" asked Gaspare with a frown.

"Latin for *ingegno,*" Matteo told him. "I didn't know, either."

"Ah." The younger man grinned. "They want us to build an *engine* with our *ingenuity!*"

Matteo sighed. "And they want us to keep it here, did you get that? Not in our own workshop."

"Well, fine. We can use the Arsenal's material rather than our own."

"Let's walk," said Matteo, who did not wish to talk business in this warren of Arsenal families. Faces—similar beyond their suspicious expres-

sions—were peeking out at them from narrow doorways. Matteo directed their steps back toward the Campo. "Is there some *campiello* where your family has lived for generations?" Matteo asked.

"My family?" Gaspare stopped and stared at him. "My grandfather was almost born in the Ghetto, because some official wanted to treat *conversos* as Jews. Papa was only allowed to move here after he married. I am the first generation to be accepted as not Jewish."

"Your family were *conversos?*"

"Spain insisted," Treviso said heavily. "And when she later found such conversions unpersuasive, conversos and Jews both fled. Do you know no history except your own city's?"

"Well, certainly not Spain's," Matteo admitted. "So . . . tell me. Do Jewish dietary laws proscribe the drinking of caofa?"

Treviso laughed. "Ask an inhabitant of that other gated community. Not all *communita del cancello* are alike."

The Arsenal had only one entrance, so they had to follow the wall (Matteo looked up at four of the thirteen guard towers as they passed) around to present themselves at the gate. Two guards scowled at them, but the *licentio* had been found in good order, and after signing a large book Gaspare waved him in. Blinking as he stepped out of the arch's shadows, Matteo felt a breeze sharp with sawdust and resin, heard hammering echo off walls, and saw before him as on a broad canvas an enclosed world, womanless and under construction, the outspread hive of the *Officina delle Meraviglie,* the Factory of Marvels.

"Where are they?" Matteo asked, standing on tiptoe.

"The ships? Why, they are everywhere." Gaspare pointed across the road to an open bale of what looked like twists of old rope. "That oakum will go to make caulking, which imbues every vessel. If you mean the hulls, they are launched in the Arsenale Nove and towed this way, past the dock where they are outfitted and rigged. When a ship emerges through the wall, it is complete." He shielded his eyes with a hand and scanned the rooftops to the north. "I don't see a mast, which means that one hasn't been launched this morning."

A wagon clattered past and the two men stepped back. "Keep close," Gaspare said as he led around a pyramid of squat kegs. "A stranger wandering loose would attract notice fast."

Matteo felt as though he were in another country, one that resembled his own in numerous but unimportant ways. Food stalls lined the thoroughfare, and arsenalotti, their attire suggesting the occupying army of a foreign prince, were eating and talking in small groups while others pushed past with barrows or carts. Workshop smells hung in the air, and a shift of wind—the huge enclosure seemed to possess its own weather—brought a whiff of the lagoon.

"We need to find Ser Cavallo," Gaspare was saying. He walked ahead of Matteo to a corner where several workmen stood around an upright cask. Matteo stood at a proper distance awaiting introduction, but Gaspare spoke rapidly to the men in the *linguaggio arsenalesco,* and they listened stolidly without paying Matteo the slightest attention. Each man held a cup, and the cask, he noticed, emitted a distinct odor of wine.

"They don't know where he is," Gaspare reported when he returned to Matteo. "Let's just go to the shop." He sounded irritated.

"That was a big barrel," Matteo observed.

"The *bevanda ordinaria?* It is supplied to all workers here, a tradition that goes back centuries." A note of pride entered Gaspare's voice.

"Free wine for the arsenalotti? I suppose the state worried about the quality of the wells on this part of the island."

"They drink a lot of it," Gaspare added gloomily.

He led Matteo to a large empty space at the back of a storehouse. "The windows admit plenty of light," he said as he swung open the doors and gestured for Matteo to enter. "And they are set well above eye level." Matteo walked across the packed earth through shafts of angled sunlight, looking at the plastered walls and the high ceiling. "There's a well twenty feet away, so water supply isn't a problem. And the cellars—" he stamped the ground— "don't extend back here."

Gaspare meant that they could build a large boiler without worrying about the floorboards. "A chimney?" Matteo asked, looking up.

"We will run a pipe through the ceiling," Gaspare told him. Matteo had meanwhile noticed a ladder built into one of the walls, which ascended to the high windows. He began to climb, ostensibly to examine the roof timbers, but actually to get a look outside.

The row of panes ran just below the eaves, and Matteo peered out upon a landscape of sheds and larger buildings, some with their own courtyards, overlooking gardens of equipage and soaking ponds separated by hedges of stacked timber. Smoke rose from a distant foundry, and a line of workers stood up suddenly bearing a beam on their shoulders. It was like one of the walled estates outside Alexandria, or the cave containing chamber after chamber of treasures in the Arabic fairy tale.

Beyond a long shed he could see the outline of a galley, and next to it another still trellised with scaffold. The Rio, invisible behind them, wound through the Arsenal like an immense gut, swelling at intervals into basins where unfinished ships floated. The surrounding docks were covered, their high roofs large as churches', and Matteo could not tell which of the smaller buildings housed shops for oarmakers and gunners, which contained storerooms or employed the caulkers or shipwrights. From a distant corner rose a column of dense smoke, the foundries of the ironsmiths.

Voices rose from below, and Matteo climbed back down to find Gaspare in conversation with a red-faced man wearing a leather apron. "This is Ser Antonio Cavallo," Gaspare said, rather informally considering the occasion. "He is one of the principal *proti* of the Arsenal."

Matteo greeted him with formal courtesy. "We thank you for providing this space for our labors," he said. He remembered that foremen ranked high in the hierarchy of Arsenal officials, for all the man's rude attire.

"The *Patroni all'Arsenale* have directed that a secure workshop be made available for Ser Traviso's labors," the foreman said solemnly. He seemed quite conscious of the irregularity involved.

"I have already seen the vigilance of the Arsenal security," said Matteo. It was intended as a kind of compliment, but the foreman frowned.

"We are the Arsenal, the *Arx Senatus,*" he warned. "Our guardianship is a sacred trust, which the Fortress of the Senate shall ever hold true."

"You think the word's origin is Latin?" asked Matteo in surprise. "I had assumed it derived from *Dar as-Sina'a,* Arabic for 'House of Construction.'"

The foreman looked as though he had been struck. Gaspare, who had been smiling uneasily, now spoke up. "Ser Cavallo will order the workshop prepared if we find the space satisfactory," he said.

Matteo looked up and down the room a final time. "It is admirable," he declared. "You have our gratitude; we shall accomplish great things here."

The three men made an awkward leave-taking, Matteo and the foreman bowing stiffly as Gaspare made tiny movements toward the door, as though to suggest that the young men now leave. They stepped out amid further assurances of high regard, watched as Ser Cavallo shut and locked the door, then headed down the narrow avenue, ducking as two boys swung a beam round to fit it through a hatch.

"You have to be careful what you say here," Gaspare called after him as they splashed through a flooded expanse. "This is a different world."

"Officials and traders understand each other," Matteo assured him. "We rub together all the time." But the foreman had not spoken like the customs or tax inspectors Matteo regularly dealt with. He had the manners of a craftsman, and Matteo realized with a start that he might have begun as one.

"There is Alvise," said Gaspare as an elderly man turned the corner and approached the door. The aged laborer squinted at the lock (of good German design) and then at Matteo, and Gaspare stepped forward to hail him in the arsenalotti dialect. "He is charged with safeguarding the warehouses of the Campagna, and now this shop in particular," he reported upon returning. "I have assured him you are intimate with the project, but he regards you doubtfully withal."

"A suspicious people," Matteo acknowledged, remembering the old man's expression.

"Suspicious and combative," Gaspare corrected. "The old doges didn't employ them as their personal guard because the arsenalotti like to take orders." He chuckled at the thought, then added: "Did you know they staged a *battaglia* for Henri III, though it wasn't the season? The French king knew of the custom, and wanted to see it done well."

"And how did he enjoy the spectacle?" Matteo asked.

"He declared it very impressive, but called a halt after a few hours. He said, '*Se è da scherzo, è troppo; se è da vero, è poco.*'"

Matteo laughed. "Not as cruel as a true battle? I thought they used sticks back then!"

"They did indeed, but I suspect that soldiers take greater care to brain their opponents. But too cruel for a game! Keep you that in mind, my friend: even our games aren't games."

They emerged into a small square where the warehouses of the Campagna gave way to the basins of the New Arsenal. Virtually everyone Matteo had seen was dressed in dun arsenalotti attire, with only a patch of grey or other hue visible in the crowds, but ahead he now saw a bright-

ly colored party of obvious foreigners, pointing and gaping as a galley was towed out of one of the covered dry docks.

"Those tourists look like Frenchmen," Matteo exclaimed.

"Very possibly," Gaspare replied easily. "Care to stroll forward and overhear their jabber?"

"No, it's, they could just as easily be Spanish! Doesn't anyone care who comes in to study your secrets?"

"The state cares intently," Gaspare said. "You may be sure that these outsiders are being watched this minute. Are not spies most revealing when they think themselves overlooked?"

Matteo ventured to the edge of the water, hoping to glimpse the timbers that were said to lie seasoning at the bottom. Assemblage began in the Arsenale Novissimo where the hulls were launched, which then attached themselves to dry dock and acquired beams and decks during the long months of labor. In the basin of the Arsenale Nove they were equipped with masts, rudder, and artillery, then were towed through the narrows of the Arsenale Vecchio, paradoxically moving backward in the shipyard's history while proceeding in their own, to be handed arms and provisions as they passed toward the gate. Matteo lifted his eyes to the matrix of seeming disorder, workers and visitors seething beyond the buildings lining the basins, and wondered at the venerable sow, ill-nurtured and slack with inanition, who yet could produce robust litters on demand.

Clear ground was visible beyond, the great basin and open yards of the Darsena Novissima. Like Venice, the Arsenal was most developed in its oldest reaches, a garden grown to thickets. Wider walkways led into the northeast corner, where a row of galleys had been drawn up onto the bank like enormous sardines. The sheds and buildings lacked the additions in various styles that characterized the older crowded neighborhoods.

"We are in the very provinces," Matteo declared. "Shall it take another century until this region is built up?"

"That depends upon the Turk. Do you hope for another Lepanto?"

"The heavenly saints forbid!" War disrupts commerce, even with Alexandria. "You may grow vegetables here with my blessing." Yet this uncongested back lot formed the headwaters of the Marvel, upstream of everything. Beyond these gates and shores, the Doge yearly married the Sea; what ceremony other than War would prompt conception here?

They rounded the Newest basin and turned south, past the shops of the mastmakers and the iron foundries. "And where do the Trevisos work?" Matteo asked.

Gaspare grimaced. "The *bronzeri* do not yet enjoy a workshop of our own. Because our output is precious but small, we are only granted use of the forges of the *fabbri,* after hours. —Of course, we spend most of our time in design and calculation," he added defensively. "In time the Arsenal will recognize our contribution, and build us a facility consonant with our merit."

At the far end of the Tana lay the other foundry, the gunmakers'. "Our boiler will be made there," Gaspare said. Matteo could smell hot iron in the waves of heat that radiated through an open doorway.

"When?" asked Matteo, trying to peer through the doorway.

"Don't ask him now," Gaspare warned, and Matteo turned to see Ser Cavallo standing thirty feet away. The street angled away from the Tana into the multi-storied crowding of the old Arsenal, which the foreman was regarding with a severe expression. The way was too narrow to pass without acknowledgement, and the three men bowed stiffly as masters and their apprentices pushed past.

"You have toured the yard?" Ser Cavallo asked, unsmiling.

"Like a gaping Dalmatian," Matteo said cheerfully. "The wealth of provision is amazing."

"Provision is had with mere gold," the foreman replied, rather ungraciously. "The Arsenal is its workers, its true wealth their skills."

"Indeed," Matteo agreed as a carter stumbled before them, nearly upsetting the load of wood he was hauling. "Their every move seems . . . *steeped* in tradition."

Cavallo looked at him closely. "They're set in their ways," he said evenly. "Those ways have saved the Republic, time and again. You smart young men remember that."

"Well, we hope to benefit the Republic ourselves," said Matteo easily, neither intimidating nor deferential. "If you used caofa as your *bevanda ordinaria,* your workers' spirits would be quickened rather than intoxicated." And when the foreman stared he added, "Have you ever tried it? When we are set up, I shall brew you a cup myself."

"The arsenalotti are really set in their ways, you know," Gaspare remarked as they headed for the gate.

"And those 'ways' include—what did you tell me? Arrogance, inefficiency, constant theft—you didn't mention the drunkenness."

"These have been problems for decades," his friend answered. "Centuries, actually."

Matteo waited until the gatekeeper let them pass before tipping him, lest it look like a bribe. "One could still call it that," Gaspare remarked as they came down the steps onto the Campo. "We will be dealing with the same people every day."

"Really?" Matteo replied blandly. "Oh, dear."

Spring swelled and ripened, a time of preparation. The trade fair was important but not to the Benvenetos, for only foreigners from the nearby cities of the Veneto came, and they to sell, not buy.

One or two asked for caofa, to Matteo's delight; he served with a free hand at the family table, then set up a stall at the Rialto. When merchants inquired about a steady supply, he spread his hands. "To furnish your own household, do as I do: put out word with the Arsenal bowmen that you will pay for sacks they bring back. Larger and more reliable shipments must wait upon the wakening of our traders."

The ships of the spring *muda* would return in June, and there was much ground to propose before then. Matteo painstakingly wrote up a business plan, as realistic as he knew investors would demand. He was tempted to show it to Uncle Bartolomeo, for support, but steeled himself instead and brought it to his father.

"You propose an old-fashioned galley company, with twenty-four shares?" Ser Benveneto looked across the top of the sheet, amused. "My son, traders do not form galley companies any more. They do not pay well enough."

"Spices do not pay well. But no one imports caofa, and we know we can find buyers."

"Do we, in the quantities you seek? And are you seriously proposing to send an actual galley?"

"A galeass, perhaps." Matteo smiled, acknowledging the implausibility. "But now that Venetians may own foreign-built ships, we need not lease from the English and the Dutch."

"But why need we lease vessels at all?" his father asked. "If shipping has ceased to be profitable for us, should we bankrupt ourselves persisting in it?"

"If we do not ply the sea, we are not Venetians," Matteo said stubbornly.

"Neither Rome nor Spain suspects that," his father answered dryly. "We have trimmed our sails to catch advantage too readily to be anything but Venetians."

Which was a fact that Matteo knew as well as anybody. It had been a century since Venice's nobility had abandoned commerce, taken their immense wealth and invested it in the rich farmlands of the Veneto. The trade that had created Venice's empire and sustained it for half a millennium had been abandoned to Greeks, Jews, and smaller families as the patriciate collected its rents. The English and the Dutch, sailing out of the forested north where timber and iron were cheap, ravaged the Venetian spice trade, fought off the pirates who turned instead to the Serenissima's vessels, and ate away at the profits of the ancient Levantine routes. Venice now collected more in anchorage tax from foreign vessels than from its own, and no one seemed to mind.

"Nor should they," Franchescina declared as she handed Matteo his wine. "Money is like water, it seeks out the easiest paths. So we lease Dutch mules rather than raise our own? So what?"

Matteo smiled affectionately. The dish on the table, of the finest Venetian glass, held nineteen caofa beans (Matteo had counted them at a glance): all that he had given her. The arrangement was attractive; one's eye was drawn to the dark beans, dusky and irregular against the glazed symmetry of the dish. He was pleased to see that their number had not diminished over time.

"Do the merchants tell you this?" he asked.

"Rogue!" She raised an embroidered cushion and made as if to throw it at him. "Their wives tell me, or rather each other. They talk money while pretending not to, the hens."

Matteo wished Franchescina would speak more about her clients, whom she entertained with card games and presumably a bit of fortune-telling. He knew perfectly well that Venetian trade was increasingly being conducted on foreign vessels; he could quote the prevailing shipping rates. The Benvenetos sent German wool and furs to the Levant and brought back what items they could still sell profitably, and Matteo's entry-books cared little what flag the cheapest ships flew. His business plan

(he had not dared show it to Franchescina, though he knew she could read perfectly well) was not a denial of reality, for all that it proposed a company of the galley. Could people not see it for what it was?

Ideas crowded Matteo's thoughts, but Gaspare elbowed them aside. "You are neglecting the great work," he complained. "We have two commissions now, and I cannot execute both of them alone."

Matteo wanted to send a servant to help Gaspare install the *Succhiatore,* but his friend seemed affronted by the suggestion. Matteo could not see the offense: he was involved also with a venture to send Murano glassware to the Besançon fair, but did not plan to help load the crates. Nevertheless, he agreed to accompany Gaspare back to the government building, and donned for the occasion his oldest and shabbiest attire.

"For this engine we want reliability, not efficiency or power," the engineer was saying. "A nice, steady suction that will require little maintenance and take years to wear out. For that we will accept a lesser efficiency, since the waste heat will moreover serve to warm the building's damp bones."

"I doubt that his Excellency's secretary will credit us with that," Matteo replied. But he began considering ways to express the benefit in twin entries against coal expended.

They stepped once more from the closed gondola to the unmarked entrance and into the building where stray glances brought frowns. Matteo wrapped himself in a black cloak as they prepared to descend the stairs, and a faint splash in the darkness below fired the sudden hope that it was merely another silent escort and not a rat.

"Are you ready?" he called up at the inch-wide hole. With a long scrape, the lead pipe began to descended toward Matteo's outstretched hand. Fitting the wire cage over the opening was manageable even in the dimness the guard wanted, but when Matteo began to guide the assembly onto flat ground he had to call irritably for more light. As he wriggled his fingers in the mud he heard a faint groan through the nearest wall, and wondered with fleeting sympathy what workmen were laboring in the next chamber.

"*Cospetto del diavolo!* You look terrible," Gaspare exclaimed when he saw Matteo. He glanced at his own dusty knees as if abashed at not having undergone more.

Matteo shrugged, neither disputing nor pressing the point. Chagrin is a negotiating advantage best used later. "Let's move the engine," he said.

The boiler rested on a wooden trestle, which had been carried in earlier by workmen ("specially blinded by the occasion," Gaspare joked) along with lengths of pipe and a toolbox. The two contractors made a show of puffing and straining as they pushed it across the floor, but the wooden-faced guards who stood by the door did not move to assist them. "Have you been making witticisms in their hearing?" Matteo hissed as they drove their shoulders against its dumb unyielding bulk. Gaspare said nothing, but Matteo noticed that he took upon himself most of the next hour's work in attaching the valves and couplings.

"Good enough for this engine," said Gaspare at last, sitting back on his heels. "Our next will require welded joints. It will generate greater pres-

sures than the *Succhiatore,* and run more efficiently. Ideally the boiler should be bronze."

"Ha," replied Matteo, who knew something of the subject.

"Will you be at the Arsenal tomorrow?" Gaspare asked as the curtained gondola took them away.

"No, and neither will you." Matteo could be irritated by Gaspare's inability to keep disparate thoughts in his head. "They will want you to start the engine, and then instruct someone in how to run it. That will require only one person, so they will only send for one. I will be inside a different fortress."

It was a fortress so distant that it had to be approached by water. This failed to bother Matteo when he was being bundled into closed cabins by the *Signoria*, but setting out for a strange land was very different, even if the land lay within the city.

The Ghetto Nuovo was bounded by water, that access might be controlled through its two bridges. The buildings—they resembled neither palazzi nor tenements—were taller than any others in the *sestieri,* as though the prospering Jews, forbidden to surpass their borders, had instead expanded upward. Matteo could see them, women and children mostly, out on their balconies, from which (he remembered) they were said to gaze at and blaspheme Christian processions. Thus the sporadic attempts to compel them to seal up windows that looked upon the Cannaregio promenade. The effect, he reflected as he approached the near bridge, would render the Ghetto yet more alien in appearance, like the windowless exteriors of Alexandrian estates, unreadable behind their high walls and orchards.

But the crowd in the Campo had no more yellow hats than Matteo could see any day at the Rialto, and the bustle of commerce felt much like that of the nearby stalls. He moved through the crush of workers and artisans until he reached the appointed portico, where a young Jew stood waiting. Silently he conducted Matteo into a narrow stairwell, up four stories (not only the partitions but the staircase itself was made of wood, as though the building could not bear more weight) to the apartments of Iacob Zacuto, who conducted them into his office.

"I have brought you some caofa," said Matteo, presenting him with a small paper bag. The trader took it curiously, as though aware that protocol did not involve an exchange of gifts, but he spoke without evidence of disquiet.

"So this is what you propose to import," he remarked. "I have spoken to colleagues who have tasted it, both here and in Mecca." He handed the bag to the young man, who took it away. "And you think that the peoples of Christendom will take to caofa like the Turks and the Levantines?"

"I know they will," Matteo replied. Zacuto indicated a chair, and he sat. "We can sell caofa even at the prices I have paid for it. When we can secure it for less, profits will result."

Zacuto made a noncommittal gesture. "You will spend some years awaiting that." He sat behind his desk and looked hard at Matteo. "And what do you want with *us?* Surely you are not approaching us as potential business partners."

"No, Ser Zacuto," said Matteo, meeting his gaze. "We both know that the Cattaveri would object to such arrangements. You have capital, which is part of what we need, but your value to this enterprise lies elsewhere, as does what we can offer you."

"Yes?" The Jew sat back, prepared to hear the pitch.

"We have created curiosity about and demand for caofa throughout the Veneto," Matteo began, "but it required effort: I had to ply the bellows before my spark took fire. Caofa is becoming known in Europe as travelers report of it, but it is only available in the port cities, and there only occasionally, as a medicine or expensive curiosity. It will not become popular until it is imported in quantity, and its praises sung by residents."

Zacuto did not nod or otherwise acknowledge these points, but remained unmoving—a bargainer's trick, but one that Matteo found slightly unnerving here, dealing with someone who was at once so familiar and so alien.

"Venetians go everywhere, but the Jews of Venice come from everywhere. Your Three Nations—which are in reality five or more, since the *Marranos* hail from Portugal as well as Spain, and many Venetian Jews have lived elsewhere in Italy—have ties with every Jewish community in Europe. If the merchants of the Ghetto took part in the caofa trade, the bean would have entree into every city with a synagogue."

"You would present Europe a Turkish drink as though it were a Jewish one?" asked Zacuto. His tone was too dry to convey irony.

"Christians do not care from whom they buy, so long as it is good." Matteo said this lightly, but with emphasis. "There are no Christian spices or silks." A wave of unease spread through him, and he concentrated with an effort.

"It was not the consumers I was thinking of." Zacuto paused, then seemed to set this thought aside. "You are interested, then, not in our money, like the poor to whom we must lend at a loss, but in our likeness as non-*goi*. As in a comedy, where the well-born lovers must pass notes through their servants. —Here now, is there something wrong with you?"

"Your low ceilings are rather oppressive," said Matteo weakly. They seemed in fact to be pressing down upon him. "It is a bit like being below deck. . . ." He rose, then grabbed the arm of his chair.

"We must get you outside," said Zacuto, coming quickly around the desk. He took Matteo by the elbow and conducted him into another room, where a narrow door opened onto a balcony. The noise without was great but the open space an immediate relief, and Matteo stepped onto the platform unconcerned that it gave slightly beneath his weight.

"Thank you," he gasped, steadying himself against the railing. The hand was gone from his sleeve, and fresh air blew through the campo at this height. Zacuto, evidently assured that this Christian would not be sick in his rooms, now stood beside him.

"We do not live in palazzi," he said blandly. "The bounds of the Ghetto were not enlarged when the *Marranos* were admitted."

A voice within was calling, and Zacuto turned to reply briefly. An elderly servant came out bearing a tray with steaming cups, which Matteo immediately saw were caofa. More surprisingly, the servant was Christian. Matteo took a cup, looked closely at the man (who did not meet his eye),

then sniffed and sipped at the brew, which was stronger than he had learned Venetians prefer.

"I do not believe that Spain and Portugal would welcome a drink so suggestive of the Turk," said Zacuto, "while the English and Nether lands, whose climates might recommend it, have sent few Jews to Venice."

"Then we shall storm those shores by other means," he said. Zacuto was looking down at the crowded campo, and Matteo followed his gaze, wondering how much ground he had lost by being stricken. Only one or two upturned faces were gazing at them, though they must have made an odd pair. It was only then that Matteo realized, with a deep start, that from this angle no one could see that he wore no yellow hat, so he must seem another Jew.

"Has the caofa cooled your blood?" Zacuto asked suddenly.

"My blood?" Matteo was little concerned with the mechanisms of the drink's beneficence, though he had rather assumed that it exerted some calming effect upon the choler.

"It is supposed that caofa offers relief to the sanguinary temperament," Zacuto replied. "Perhaps the engine that forces blood through the veins is driven by heat."

"That blood moves through the veins is news to me," Matteo replied politely. If the Jews, whose physicians were at least as good as the Christians,' had claims to make concerning the *therapeusis* of caofa, he was prepared to hear them.

"It was discovered not long ago, by one of your own countrymen. There are valves within the veins, permitting movement in one direction only."

"Valves?" Matteo stared at the Jew.

"Suggesting that blood flows in a stream. They were discovered by Paolo Sarpi."

At this Matteo blinked and only just refrained from exclaiming, "*Fra* Sarpi?" Instead he affected a milder surprise, and remarked, "If the savior of Venice has distinguished himself in anatomical studies as well, he is a prodigy indeed."

"He only saved it from the Curia," replied Zacuto with a short laugh. "Will your caofa save us from Spain?"

Matteo pondered the question, to which he had given no very satisfactory answer, as he walked back through Cannaregio. He had wanted to reply *Yes!* despite the risk of appearing foolish, but his assurance would have sounded muddled and weak to the hard-headed trader. The Republic's patricians cling now to land, while its merchants are content if their money travels for them: how to explain the miracle of the caofa bean, that carries the land within it, yet releases an immaterial essence that quickens the spirit and brightens the eye? Yes, the spread of this substance into Europe would halt the advance of Spain, like throwing open shutters to let sunlight strike mildew.

Talk at the dinner table concerned the Besançon Fair, now underway in Piacenza although news would not reach Venice for a week or more. Matteo wasn't sure that anyone else present understood the proceedings, though his kinsmen never spoke of them with the boorish incredulity of older traders mocking the spectacle of financiers attending a fair with no

goods, no coin, just thousands of pieces of paper being matched together and torn up. The Benvenetos at least understood how bills of exchange could be cleared, like the wake from passing gondolas meeting wave to trough and vanishing.

What mattered, of course, was where the Genoese *banchieri di conto* would set the exchange rate for liquidating bills. The rise or fall of the *conto* would reverberate through Venice and Christendom, although in ways Matteo wasn't sure he could predict, or himself understand.

"And where are you bound?" asked his father, turning at last to his youngest son.

"Tomorrow I go to the Signoria," Matteo replied, careful to keep from his voice any tone that his brothers could call self-important, "to see Senator Domenico's secretary." He did not add that he was also going to the secret library, to request the new book by Della Porta.

"Seeking a letter patent for a new steam kettle?" Tullio drawled.

"Seeking more money, now that I have justification," Matteo replied. "Is that not a good thing?"

"So you are not going to the Arsenal, to pound nails?" Alessandro inquired.

"He looks as though he already has," said Tullio suddenly. "See his hands!"

And the table erupted in laughter as Matteo looked dumbly at his caofa-powdered fingertips, black as soot though more aromatic. His mother passed down her lace handkerchief, though Matteo pulled out his own and began rubbing before it reached him. Bartolomeo made a mild remark about traders not minding getting their hands dirty, but the mirth washed over it.

"Will the Fair mean a carnival?" asked little Felicia, saving him.

"Not that kind of fair, dear," said her father. Though it once was, thought resentful Matteo. Nobody thought to ask him about that, and he sat silently, willing the warmth to drain from his face.

"Our own carnival will start soon enough," Ser Benveneto assured her. The actual carnival season would not begin until the feast of San Stefano, but a festive—that is, a non-working—atmosphere would begin to gather in the streets even before *battagliola* season broke out, which was invariably sooner than permitted. Perhaps Ser Benveneto imagined that his granddaughter would enjoy seeing artisans push each other off bridges. (Her father certainly did.)

Battagliole soon, but first the *muda*. What price his agents paid for the arriving caofa, and the price at which he would sell it, would determine whether the next *muda* sailed with Matteo a *patron* or a shopper.

When he went upstairs two hours later he found a copy of *Il Gentiluomo,* which his father had given him when he was fifteen, propped on his bed. A passage was marked with a ribbon, and he did not even have to pick it up to guess that it was the one where Muzio explained that a gentleman must do nothing with his own hands, but have everything carried out by his agents. Matteo knocked it with his own hands to the floor, then called angrily for his cloak. On the way out he picked up the book and returned it to the library.

"Did you sniff your fingers? Perhaps that's not the sign of a *gentiluomo*."

"You tell me; you have entertained a greater variety of them."

"With me they do whether it is proper or not!"

The richest caofa—brewed with unscanting profligacy—bore a savor so strong it touched the corporeal, with the piercing seethe that was only produced by flesh. Damp loam rose to the face, alive with the quality of being alive. Can such complexity speak only to the tongue, an array of sensations like an artist's paint box? The wet grounds later held nothing: all was expended in that single release.

Which meant there was nothing next day. Senator Domenico's secretary was sour, as was the librarian. Clouds of papers swarmed to vex him, turbid with numbers that promised knowledge but tendered none. And in the afternoon word ran through the Rialto that the new *conto* was surprisingly high, sending waves of alarm that accomplished nothing save to interfere with actual work.

Matteo visited their Arsenal workshop the next week and found Gaspare in high spirits. "Here, sign this," the engineer said, picking up a sheet and thrusting it at him. Matteo studied it in perplexity. "It's a loan agreement for bronze, so we can build our valves."

"You melted down a ship-owner's cannon?" asked Matteo disbelievingly.

"Had to be recast anyway, the muzzle was cracked. He won't need it until the next *muda,* by which time our *ingegno* will have proved its worth and the senate reimbursed us the cost of the bronze, which I will use to buy more for the trader."

"And if not, I am responsible for the charges." But Matteo was already looking for the ink.

"But that's what traders do, underwrite bills. Especially for ventures that carry no risk!" And Gaspare laughed, ground a pinch of sawdust between thumb and forefinger, and sprinkled it over the fresh signature.

A galeass beat the *muda* to port, bearing incomplete but promising news of the spring convoy. The letters it carried for Casa Benveneto were sufficient to keep Matteo busy for days, and when word came one morning of sails on the horizon, he groaned instead of setting out for the waterfront.

It was another day before the bills reached them, and after supper when Ser Benveneto found and showed Matteo the entries for nineteen sacks of caofa. The price paid was only somewhat higher than Matteo had hoped, but the exhilarating size of the shipment was faintly alarming: five times what he had previously disposed of, most of which he had given away.

I will sell fully half, he mentally indited. *And that half not sold shall be seed, to grow the next year's customers.*

Fresh caofa next morning at the Rialto, so that Matteo's fellow traders, even the Germans at the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi,* might know what the *muda* had brought. The flavor lost its finest subtleties within minutes, so Matteo had the serving boy grind and then brew one small pot at a time, which would be finished before it could stale and left interested customers waiting while the next was prepared. He counted the numbers of

customers, and, after the second day, the number who showed up more than once.

The discomfited Germans, required to stay at the *Fondaco,* sell all their wares there, and use the proceeds only to buy Venetian goods, came over curiously, assured Matteo that caofa would never rival beer, then each bought a cup (when their companions weren't there) and sipped with the assessing expression of a rentier pinching the pigs. Eventually they banded together and bought half a sack, which Matteo measured with a fine pewter scoop, like a Dutchman pouring out cloves.

Caofa became modestly fashionable, something for the worldly to be seen enjoying. Merchants bought small paper bags made for sweetmeats, and their wives asked Matteo about flavorings. An entire sack disappeared in these tiny increments, then much of another in larger bites destined for the mainland.

Greeks and resident Turks began to buy, though the Jews seemed not much interested, and an attempt to make a beachhead in the Arsenal was repulsed. "Don't worry about attracting the artisans," his father said. If they disposed of nine sacks at these prices, the profits would be genuine.

"Selling it by the bag, like a shopkeeper?" asked Franchescina. "Your brothers must be making comments."

"Probably, but not to me." Matteo in fact recognized that the expense of keeping a servant there four hours a day should properly be added to the costs. "I would rather sell tiny bags to a hundred *cittadini* than full sacks to three. Eventually the hundred will want sacks."

And indeed a taste for the bean seemed to be spreading through the city's traders, foreigners, and scholars. One day Gaspare showed him a short treatise, *De Flatus Caofae,* which discussed the nature of farts engendered by caofa. "What does it say?" Matteo demanded, flipping through the pages of Latin.

"Well, too much caofa," said Gaspare helpfully. "*You* know. Always seemed a small price to pay."

The heat of summer seemed an unpropitious season for consuming hot caofa, but Matteo reminded colleagues that those in the Turkish lands drank it in the blazing heat of day and derived much benefit thereby. The serving boy all but dared customers to drink the steaming beverage down and feel its effects, to which he would then loudly draw attention. For his part Matteo did not scruple to point out how good caofa tasted on damp winter mornings, by which time supplies might be less plentiful than now.

The long sweltering afternoons might prompt industrious citizens to hot refreshment, but unoccupied youths, idle and bored, lounged at the ends of bridges, drinking wine (which heats the senses and lulls judgment) and calling taunts to like idlers on the opposite side. A volley of abuse would answer this, leading to exchanges of contemptuous display that would rapidly escalate until one side launched itself across the bridge. The shouts and flying fists would quickly draw a crowd, hundreds or even thousands pouring in from neighboring campi to line each side of the canal and scream support. The summer feast days were increasingly given to these "spontaneous" outbursts—which seemed to relieve only a

portion of the excitement that had built up over the previous weeks—and *battagliola* season approached through a cloud of increasing pressure.

Matteo was sitting peaceably in his office when the summons came. His father appeared in the doorway, a paper in his hand and an expression on his face that Matteo had never seen before. "It is from the Avogadori di Comun," he said. "You are accused of bringing discord to the Republic."

"*What?*" Matteo read through the summons disbelievingly. He was charged, in formal government prose, with employing the resources of Casa Benveneto to disrupt civil order and jeopardize the public safety. The last phrase made Matteo's head swim; everything alleged was absurd, but allegations concerning the public welfare could conceivably attract the attention of the Council of Ten.

"We are supposed to appear in eight days," his father said grimly. The pronoun was a kindness, or perhaps an assurance of solidarity, for the document named *Matteo Benveneto* alone. Matteo had never seen his own name on an official paper, and his gaze fixed upon it with paralyzed horror.

"This is . . . *untrue,*" he said at last, sounding fatuous to his own ears.

His father made an angry sound. "It is the pharmacists," he said. "They have brought a complaint."

"For what?" Matteo asked. But he immediately guessed at something.

"You sell as an everyday drink something that they prescribe as a costly medicine, and tell the city's merchants that you can obtain it more cheaply still? How do you think they will respond?"

"But that is their misfortune," Matteo protested, indignant. "What does the Republic care if I manage to undercut these frauds?"

"They will claim that caofa is too potent to be sold as a frivolous quaff," Ser Benveneto predicted. "That you will poison unsuspecting Venetians with this toxic brew." Matteo tried to protest that nations of Turks drank it daily, but his father interrupted. "Don't argue it with *me*. That is the attack they will make, unless you have done something else to leave yourself vulnerable."

In fact it was something worse. A discreet inquiry (probably involving a bribe, although Matteo was not involved) brought word that the Avogadori were investigating charges that Matteo had encouraged rioting during the feast day *scaramuccie* by selling a Turkish drink that inflamed the spirits and counteracted wine's natural tendency to slow responses. The skirmishes' reliance upon fists rather than sticks and knives would be undermined, resulting in "widespread injury and even loss of life," as the papers evidently had it.

Matteo's wrath— "Those louts don't buy caofa! And weapons are no more common in bridge fights near the Rialto than in those a mile away!"—swept a cloak over darker feelings, which themselves thrashed above a still pool he could not glimpse, filled with something black and bitter. Walking along the Rio del Palazzo one drizzly afternoon, Matteo felt the writhings of helpless rage as something dying, a serpent poisoned by the toxins of fear.

"Are you going to speak at all?" Gaspare asked him, less annoyed than bemused. "I do believe you are suffering from *melancholia*."

Matteo laughed. "Is that a word arsenalotti use?"

"Don't be a snot. I have read a book or two, you know—some on unlikely subjects, since it's hard to know what's in a book until you read it."

Matteo did not want to discuss Gaspare's familiarity with the varieties of human temperament. He said: "I am distracted because I must speak this afternoon with a lawyer, and unhappy because no one is now willing to deal in caofa. These emotions are the consequence of outward causes, and that is all."

The lawyer, at least, was prepared to stick to outward causes. "You should get statements," he said after reading through the complaint while Matteo sat waiting. "From your servants who prepared the drink, that they served it almost exclusively to merchants, and never to idle young men. From fellow traders, that they purchased it at prices too high for the *popolani*. From those colleagues you approached as investors, that you planned to import this substance at a cost that young artisans would find expensive, and that you acknowledged it would take years to bring the price down.

"Assure your colleagues that they may say whatever they wish, and do not be dismayed by their statements' self-serving natures." He smiled faintly. "The Avogadori are used to witnesses falling over themselves to make clear their own lack of involvement."

"Will these suffice?" Matteo asked in a voice that betrayed him by quavering.

"They form the foundation of your rampart. Each answer you give is a stone, to be piled up methodically."

It was an incongruous image to hear in this handsome office, across a walnut desk wider than his father's. The lawyer, silver-haired and richly attired, seemed less concerned about this business than Matteo, which might or might not be reassuring.

"I will set forth everything clearly," Matteo promised.

The counselor shook his head emphatically. "Restrict your answers to the points at hand," he said. "Content yourself with protesting your innocence, and do not attack the interests behind the complaint. As far as the Avogadori know, you have no idea who laid these baseless charges."

Matteo had intended a vigorous denunciation of these powers. He nodded, however, and asked meekly, "What of the *Shirri?* Their patrols must know that bridge fighting has been no worse this year."

"That is not for you to demonstrate. Let the Avogadori wonder what the arrest records show. They will adjourn, request further reports from various quarters, and the inquiry will in time grind to a halt."

Matteo didn't like the sound of this. "But I require vindication," he insisted. "No trader will join my venture while everyone is waiting to see if I am arrested."

The counselor shrugged, then offered a sympathetic smile, Matteo's last. "Many of your potential partners have had their own dealings with the law over the years, and know enough not to expect a formal exoneration. You will have to rely upon your own powers of argument, which have after all gotten you this far."

"Alas," said Matteo, looking about the chamber as though reflecting on where *this far* now was.

"Traders do not make the worst witnesses," the lawyer added unexpectedly. "You know enough to be pleasing, and how to explain matters without condescension. Let the Avogadori feel the force of your desire to persuade, and they will soon decide that this case ought not to have come before them."

He dressed himself the next morning as though to meet a foreign delegation, the accomplished young trader of good family. His brothers were nowhere to be seen, as befit their doubts concerning his status: beloved son riding into his first battle or scapegrace facing judgment. Ser Benveneto stood waiting at the door, with a fatherly hug and a few words of advice. "Look them in the face, not insolently but as a fellow Venetian. Your family—its generations of service to the Republic—stand behind you, visible to them: but you should not allude to it. Rely on your dignity and upon the justice of your enterprise, but do not be concerned whether they approve it—and above all *don't offer them caofa*."

He rode to the Palazzo Ducale in an open gondola, a young trader of repute keeping an appointment with officials. His morning cup, swathed in milk and honey, warmed his stomach without assailing it. Wine at lunch, assuming they didn't clap him in chains.

Matteo stated his business to the clerk at the top of the Scala dei Censori, who turned a page in the great ledger before him, read carefully, then directed him without expression down a series of corridors. Matteo was careful to attend his instructions, but two guards nevertheless fell in beside him as he turned to go, an escort to create the appearance that he was being brought in under duress. As a piece of Venetian ceremony, it was less venal than many, and Matteo gave them a single sour look.

The Avogaria lay beyond a pair of heavy oak doors, opposite a penitential bench to which Matteo was brusquely directed. It was ninety minutes later that the great doors swung open and a secretary poked out his head to call Matteo's name. Matteo had tucked away his book as soon as he heard the knob turn, and rose smoothly at the sound. What little he had absorbed about domestic economy vanished at once, but the exercise had calmed him. He took a deep breath, prayed: *San Menas, patron of traveling merchants, be with me now,* and stepped forward.

The doorway led onto a different corridor, narrower and differently tiled. Four doors down, and he was gestured into the one on the right. The tableau was just as predicted: three officials sitting at a table at the far end, with a secretary or two sitting to the side. No chair for himself. It was not quite a trial, those being conducted in the Quarantia Criminale, but if things did not go well here there would soon be one.

"Matteo Michaelangelo Benveneto, Venetian, of Casa Benveneto?" asked the man in the center, a balding patrician in his forties. Matteo bowed. The man read from a sheet he held before him. "You are accused of attempting to disrupt civil order and jeopardize the public safety of our Serene Republic by importing a potent substance, made from the bean of the . . ." (he hesitated and scowled) "kaffa?—plant, which, taken in the large draughts that you have urged upon buyers, and especially in the simple apprentices and workmen . . ." The charge ran on along the lines Matteo expected, sparing him at least (he had worried about this) some

unprepared-for surprise. He listened carefully, and when the official finished and raised his eyes inquiringly, Matteo realized he had to speak.

"I have been apprised of these charges, Your Eminences, and with respect I declare them false, and my family and myself innocent of these imputations." He looked to the official on the left (having decided that the presiding official was a mediocrity with a sinecure), wondering whether this was appropriate, and received a tiny nod.

"The charges," the patrician began, untying the ribbon that held the fat folder the official on his right slid before him. Matteo watched with horrified fascination as the cover was lifted to disclose a pile of documents, each a different size and color. The Avogadore paused like a German merchant before a plate of fresh seafood, wondering where to begin. One of the items, Matteo recognized with disgust, was *De Flatus Caofae*.

"What is this?" The prosecutor frowned as he looked down at a folded sheet sitting at the top. He picked it up and turned it over, showing the seal. The official on his left started slightly.

Everyone watched as the patrician unfolded the letter and read it. His face darkened. "It appears," he said, "that the Holy Office has taken an interest in the case of Ser Benveneto. Why was I not shown this?"

All three avogadori turned to one of the secretaries, who mimed bewildered incomprehension. "I did not receive the letter," he protested. "I would have informed your excellencies of its arrival. Perhaps it was Lippomano?"

Matteo heard all this through a haze of stunned incomprehension. Word that his "case" had attracted the attention of the Venetian Inquisition had stopped all thought, like a cork blocking the duct that conveys the substance of reflection. The idea of the Holy Office was frozen before him, like an image lingering on the surface of a pool after the figure who cast it has gone.

The officials were conversing in low voices, their secretaries hovering behind them to lean, pointing, over the folder. Perhaps I will faint, thought Matteo in a flash of lunatic clarity. People must topple over as they stand here all the time. Is it taken as a sign of guilt?

Someone cleared his throat. "It appears, Ser Benveneto," the official on the left was saying, "that the Holy Office has taken an interest in your case." A part of Matteo's consciousness registered the lawyers' tendency to repeat each other's phrases. "This raises a question of jurisdiction, which must be settled before we proceed." He seemed to be saying that Matteo could not remain standing here during this period.

The official in the center, deep in discussion with a secretary over the folder, looked up at this. "You may go," he said, with evident reluctance. "But be prepared for a further summons, and do not leave Venice in the meanwhile." Someone murmured something, and he laughed.

Numbly Matteo bowed and left the room. Someone was sitting on the bench, who looked up anxiously as Matteo pushed open the doors, but he did not take notice. Corridors and stairways opened before him, which his mind traced in reverse without conscious intervention. It was only as he stood in the courtyard, with the Porta della Carta before him and Venice beyond, that he roused himself and balked, obscurely but decisively, at walk-

ing through the public entrance like an uncumbered man. Lesser exits dotted the Palace like mouseholes, and Matteo forswore the Gate of Paper—why was it called that?—to slip instead, a tradesman not a *gentiluomo,* through a victualer's door and back into the Piazza.

He was just south of the Bridge when someone caught up with him. "Ser Benveneto?" in an unsmiling voice.

Matteo started—what had he been expecting, a gang of Inquisitors? some physician come to punch his nose?—but it was one of the escorts to the unnamed government building, who never smiled. "Good afternoon," he said, civil but not welcoming.

"You must come with me," the guard said, peremptory as always.

It was the stuff of low comedy: a cracked joint in the *Succiatore,* official outrage, the wrong contractor dragged in and ordered to fix it. "You can't make repairs? Then grab a bucket and start bailing!" Matteo began to explain, and realized that a second guard, this one bigger, had materialized on his other side and had taken his arm. "Excuse me," he said sharply, pulling away, "but—"

The blow sent him reeling, into the other's arms. Matteo, shocked, was pinned before he could draw breath, and tried to regain his footing only to have his boots kicked out from under him. Men were scrambling from a nearby gondola, running up. A glimpse of shocked onlookers as they closed round him.

"Hey!" It was his only outburst. A cloak was thrown over him, entangling as it obscured. His sense of direction warned where he was being pushed, and he flailed madly. Hands grasped him, four, six, then hoisted. He was flying through the air, and down.

Darkness swathed but did not comfort, a region of indeterminate nature. It was confusion, like a season of prolonged storms, that disrupted communication but did not block signals of distress from distant provinces. He lay in a condition of disarray but stillness, ignorant of everything yet aware of the magnitude of his defeat, though its dimensions, in this realm beyond time, were not measurable. Assessment came with intervals like day and night, unavailable to a mode of being that took form around an irregular distant drip, the texture of wet stone against his cheek.

Once he heard the sliding of a grate, and dimness filled some portion of his chamber. He sat up, trying to turn his neck to see the rectangle of light, but it whispered shut before he could get his bearings. The second of illumination had revealed the fixity of his enclosure, which he could still sense even in the darkness. After sitting upright for several minutes, he reached out to find the nearest wall. It was some time before he embarked to trace its circumference, and when he did he discovered he could not determine the size of his cell, for in the darkness he could not retain the number of sideways steps he took from one corner to the next. A narrow bench occupied the center of the floor, and he stretched out upon it.

Time loses significance in the enormity of failure, fading into the lightless eternity of a drowned ship sinking through the depths. If he made an effort Matteo could recall intervals when the door had swung open and a

tray had been pushed in or his slop bucket taken away. He no longer turned when the spy slot slithered open and darkness bloomed briefly into grey. Lying in the unchanging stillness, he arranged his few facts in patterns, fusing them finally into hard diamonds of surmise that he let slip from his fingers into blackness.

They came when he was deep in reverie, something—it was deeply felt, but impossible to articulate consciously—about Marina when they were children, before he fell in love with her. Its substance had gathered to a density too great to disperse at once, and Matteo sat up disoriented, not dazzled (he had learned to glance away when the door swung open) but unmoored. "Come on," was all they said, and hoisted him under the arms.

"How long have I?" Matteo asked, lucidly he thought, but got no answer. He was being walked down the corridor, whose high windows, too high to see through, admitted the wan half-light of dusk or not quite dawn. Matteo tried to focus his thoughts but could not; they were hurrying him too briskly, pausing only to pull open doors. It was when he thought of how he could collect himself while waiting on the bench that he realized this respite would be denied him.

They showed him in at once, although the seconds between knocking and admittance allowed Matteo to straighten his clothes and push back his hair. His beard was raspy as the side of a file, not yet long enough to curl. *They want you to be disoriented,* he thought, and tried to close a fist around that.

The sight that greeted him as the doors swung open was certainly sufficient to chill. An ecclesiastical official, hatted and grim, sat glaring at the center of the table, which was wider and finer than the last. Neither a priest nor bishop, both familiar enough from weekly Mass, nor even similar in attire to the Archbishop, whom Matteo knew, if only from a distance, from civic ceremonies. Of course he was an Inquisitor, possibly no more than monsignor by one ordering of rank, but the wielder of terrible powers. Matteo realized that his life would quite possibly end in this room.

"The prisoner shall come forward," someone said. No recitation of his name for purposes of formal identification; he was in the realm now of confident certainties. Matteo got a quiet prod in the back, and took three steps forward. No hints from the table on proper protocol today, but he hesitated only a second, before giving a formal bow.

"You stand accused of material abetment in the ungodly practice of *divinazione,*" said an official to the Inquisitor's side. Matteo had expected His Eminence to do the speaking, and wondered that someone clearly from the Signoria was present at a Tribunal. "The gravity of this offence has brought your case to the attention of the Holy Office," the man continued, sounding angry. Matteo looked from one man to the other, trying to figure out what was happening here. He desperately wanted a cup of caofa.

"I beg your pardon, ser?" he said inanely. The actual wording of the charge was only now taking form in his mind. "Divination?" He could not have been more bewildered if they had accused him of being the sultan in disguise.

The Inquisitor spoke for the first time. "Do you recognize these?" he asked heavily. His palm opened, disclosing a handful of dark seeds.

"They are beans, Your Eminence." There was no question what they were, even from this distance. "They look like caofa beans."

"Indeed. And did you give these beans to the woman known as Franchescina Castellano?"

Matteo stared.

"Come, speak up," said the official from the Signoria sharply.

"Ser, I . . ." Matteo concentrated his wits with an effort. Always admit what they know anyway. "That woman I know, Your Eminence. I deal in caofa beans, and have brought them to her apartment, to prepare the drink with which I hope to make my family's fortune."

"Did you make her a gift of these beans?"

"I . . . no. I do not recall ever leaving her with more beans than we used to make the infusion." An awful suspicion was dawning. "She may have kept some back from our grinding."

There was a chuckle from the side of the room. The official shot an angry glance in that direction, but the Inquisitor appeared not to notice. He said, "So you did not give the beans to Signorina Castellano for their efficacy in the practice of *buttar fave?*"

"Of. . . ?" Matteo frowned at the unfamiliar syllables. After a second he sorted them into two words, and his expression blossomed in astonishment. "You mean *bean-casting?*"

The official began to speak sharply, but the Inquisitor raised his hand. "That is correct. Do you deny that you aided this woman, your lover, in seeking greater power in divination through the potency of these foreign beans?"

"But that's—" Matteo shook his head in distraction. "They're just a commodity! The Turks and Jews of the Levant import them by the sackful, and all they do is *grind them up!*" He stared at the man wild-eyed, as though lunacy had seized them both.

A third official, who had been writing busily, now spoke without looking up. "So you attest that the beans were brought into the woman Castellano's house solely for consumption, and that you did not suggest or encourage their use for unholy purposes."

"I, yes." Matteo blinked. The question, laid out on the trellis of syntax, now seemed almost sane.

The men behind the table were conversing in low voices. "Take him away," someone said, which Matteo heard but did not apply to himself until a guard plucked his sleeve. He allowed himself to be led out the door, past a group of young lawyers who had stood listening. As the guards maneuvered past them Matteo abruptly addressed one. "How long since my arrest?"

The young man frowned at him, then pursed his lips. "Six days," he said.

He was jerked forward, then marched quickly to his cell and pushed in. He fell asleep almost at once, then woke, hours or a day later, and felt the uncertain boundaries of his confines to be more distinct. Most immediately, he knew now where he was: back in the Palazzo Ducale, in the dank cells known as the *pozzi*. His trip on the floor of the gondola had been a

return one, and he wondered why the agents of the Council of Ten (as they surely were) had not simply waited outside the Avogadori's door.

Confident now that he was being fed daily, Matteo began to count his meals. He established that he slept once between them, which he could now assay at a night's worth. Something like structure took form, a bulwark against the enveloping darkness.

Other assemblages were less easy, and he lay on his back for hours, trying to fit them together. Franchescina had used the pilfered beans to tell fortunes, and must by now have joined the ranks of women convicted of some form of stregonaria, like those he had seen (childhood memories were more vivid here than recent ones) standing in the pillory wearing placards that read: *Per la santa Inquisitione per herbarie e strigarie e buttar fave*. Had she boasted to her clients that her beans were of the caofa plant, so that whoever denounced her could guess at Matteo's connection and include him as well? Or had Franchescina, under examination, freely spilled his name to the Tribunal?

One piece didn't fit: what Matteo had faced had not been a Tribunal, which would have been filled with clerics, but something else. What then, and why? He turned the piece over in the darkness, looking for an edge he could match.

On the twenty-ninth day he thought he heard a faint noise drifting under his door through some open window, then realized it was now the *battagliola* season, and the surf-whisper perhaps the roar of thousands. Curly-bearded, he touched his cheek and thought, *I look like a galley slave*. And might soon be one, if Franchescina's perfidy combined with the pharmacists' charges into something sufficiently malign.

When reassemblage failed, the darkness reclaimed him. Too stealthy to show its leading edge, despair crept up next to him, coating without whelming, like oil, then wholly subsuming once it no longer mattered. Matteo thought of his mother and sister, their misery; the gentlemen Benveneto, their disappointment; the disgrace that burned inextinguishable, tainting his name in others' mouths like the rankest dregs. Failure most shameful, a bankrupt's or coward's, seared him as he lay unseen, a twist of pain in the ruins of his once brilliant ambition.

It was the sixty-third day when they came for him. "Get up," called the turnkey as the door swung open, the middle silhouette in the dim but stinging light. The two guards pushed past him and led Matteo away without a word.

They had proceeded down two corridors and were climbing a staircase—the demand upon unaccustomed muscles may have woken something—when Matteo realized that he was being taken perhaps to judgment or even summary execution, but that there was also the possibility that he was about to get the chance to explain himself, for which he had raged through long darkened hours. An interlocutor who would ask what he *had* been doing, since he was not going to confess to the allegations collected. The self-evident truth of his words, their justice and reason, would sweep away the compacted illogic of the charges against him, which must contradict each other and established fact at numerous bleeding points.

The tiny room into which he was thrust was scarcely larger than his cell, though better lit. Matteo sank onto the narrow bench and looked at the second door (through which faint murmurs could be heard) with relief: torture chambers don't have waiting rooms.

The functionary who opened the door, however, looked at Matteo so blackly that he flinched. The fact that it was not a guard come to let him in was even more alarming. Where was he, that prisoners no longer needed guards?

The chamber beyond was large, although the high ceiling and darkened windows (Matteo had not realized it was night) lay beyond the few lamps' illumination. The five robed men sat not behind a table but in raised chairs against the far wall, the center one framed by a red panel. Clerks and lawyers occupied the tables, against the wall opposite the windows. Matteo approached slowly, glancing about in bewilderment.

"What are you looking for?" one of them asked. His voice carried clearly enough to echo faintly behind Matteo.

"Your pardon, Your Eminence," he said in a croak. How long since he had last spoken? "I had expected to see an Inquisitor present."

"This is a court of the Consiglio dei Deici, not the Inquisition!" another judge snapped. "You have already caused us trouble by involving the Holy Office in this."

"I beg your pardon," Matteo whispered. He tried to fix on this, but his thoughts spun helplessly, like gears failing to engage. *The Council of Ten!* Neither of the previous interviews had been formal trials, and perhaps this was not, either; but with the Ten you did not always get one.

It would be damning to say nothing further, so he added, "The last time I was taken from my cell I was questioned by an Inquisitor. I have not been apprised of the nature of the proceedings against me, and must apologize for my ignorance."

One of the judges stirred. "It is not culpable under law for a citizen innocently to complicate an investigation by suffering the attentions of third parties," he observed. "That this has inconvenienced this inquiry cannot be one of the counts against Ser Benveneto."

"We have enough already," another judge snapped. He pointed at Matteo. "You! What have you been doing poking about with secret books? And why have you shown such interests in the writings of the Neapolitan Giovanni Battista della Porta?"

"Della Porta?" For a second Matteo felt, insanely, as though he were being examined by tutors. "He wrote *Pneumatica,* a study of the power of steam."

"It is interesting that you went looking for it in the Archivio dei Documenti, where you had a commission to search for writings about steam from the Turkish lands."

Matteo blinked. "With respect, Your Eminence, I had permission from the office of Senator Domenico to look for books about steam power. Certainly we were interested in works by Arab philosophers, but if there were new studies published by Christians, I read them as well."

"Yet you also took the opportunity to look for writings about caofa, did you not?"

"Let us not turn to the matter of caofa just yet," the presiding judge suggested. Matteo was looking from one man to the other in astonishment.

"Very well," said the finger pointer. "This Neapolitan is also the author of another treatise, *De Furtivis Litterarum Notis,* in five books. You were looking at that volume as well. Why the interest in an author who writes about codes and cryptography?"

Matteo stared. "But that was more than forty years ago! Della Porta wrote that book as a very young man."

"That scarcely matters," said the fourth judge, on the far right. Two of the others nodded at this. "The prisoner has shown a pattern of gaining entry to restricted sites and then looking about too closely. I am more interested in why he was poking about in the casa basement."

The judge who had demurred earlier now raised a hand. "We should take care not to utter secrets in front of the prisoner. It is still possible he could be acquitted and released."

"That hardly seems likely," the presiding judge replied. He leaned forward slightly to address his colleague on the right. "Do you wish to ask about the basement installation? That little Jew from the Arsenal told us nothing, even under the *cordello*."

"I suggest we try the *cordello* now."

"To what purpose?" the third judge asked. "The wretched *converso* spilled everything he could, and we learned nothing that was not evident from their papers. Everything heard to date suggests two young men who don't know when not to exhibit curiosity. Unless this prisoner's answers give evidence of dissembling, the *cordello* would be an unwarranted recourse."

Matteo followed the exchange, but a spreading chill seemed to have frozen his faculties, soul, humours, and all. Like ice in a conduit, the words he was hearing had blocked the flow of thought, which hung immobilized before his mind's eye.

"Very well," said the presiding judge. "Let us turn then to matters that are better documented. Prisoner: Tell us of your dealings with the Jews of the Ghetto. And know that at the first sign of prevarication, you shall be hanging from the *cordello*."

Matteo drew breath slowly. Even an ice sculpture may move if ordered so by the Ten. "Your Eminences," he began. "If you have seized the papers of myself and my associate Gaspare Treviso, then you surely know of my efforts to find investors for a plan to import caofa beans from Egypt, which we hope to sell throughout Europe, thus enriching my family and benefiting our Republic. Such investment has been hard to secure: prosperous merchants now entrust their capital with Genoese and Florentine houses, which guarantee safe returns; while the noble families of Venice have placed their wealth in their mainland estates."

He paused; had he just offended his judges? The ice had numbed; he could not care. "The Jews are hungry for opportunity, and they have more money than the Greeks. I would approach them as investors if the Cattaveri permitted it. Instead, I proposed to a Jewish merchant that the

Jewish communities in European ports be used to promote my caofa. My family knows well the laws regulating our profession; there is nothing wrong with this."

The judges all looked at each other. "And what did the Jew Zacuto say to this?" one asked.

"He was guarded," Matteo replied. He was trying to remember what he might have written down. The ice was breaking up, things said a moment ago were bobbing into view. "Wait—did you think that Gaspare had something to do with this? No, he is merely—"

"Silence!" the presiding judge snapped, distracted. A lawyer had come up with a paper, which he took and studied. There was a silence as it was passed along from one judge to the next.

"According to Zacuto, you showed nervousness and extreme agitation," one of them said after a moment. "He said that you seemed plainly aware that your actions were irregular."

"You . . . you have been interrogating my prospective partners?" Matteo asked in astonishment. A blow to the back of his head sent him pitching forward to his knees.

"You are not here to pose questions," one of the judges exclaimed angrily as Matteo shook his head and rose slowly. He knew enough not to turn to see who had struck him. "If there is another outburst like that, I shall call in a guard. They are much rougher than my clerks."

"I beg your pardon, Your Eminence," Matteo said. The court was regarding him sternly, five family portraits in a forbidding gallery. Matteo distantly registered the thought as he studied each face in turn.

One of them leaned forward. "And what does that expression of yours portend?" he asked. His tone was not particularly dangerous.

"Your Eminence, I scarcely know how to answer." Matteo spread his hands. "If you have called in and questioned the merchants I have spoken to, I am ruined beyond possible redemption. I could walk out of this building tomorrow, and every member of my profession would treat me like a leper. I—" He looked up to the ceiling, dim with its indistinct design, then back down at them. "Ask whatever you wish," he said simply. "I have nothing to hide."

"How gracious of you," one of them remarked. Matteo straightened his back and looked ahead. What *did* his expression portend? He had no idea; he was no longer wholly inhabiting his body.

The judge on the far right glanced again at the paper and set it down. "You approached a Jew of the Ghetto, who knew enough to agree to nothing. You passed no money to him, and he undertook no steps to develop the secret network you proposed." He looked at the presiding judge. "What about the Arsenal?"

"He was certainly not secretive." The last judge now spoke up. "He offended every official he spoke to, and their workshop was searched nightly." He shrugged. "They built a machine that would pump water if you kept a fire burning."

"The *ingegno,*" somebody said. "The engineer said that Benveneto hoped to circumvent the terms of his government contract."

"How?" asked the demurrer. "They finished the device, or almost did,

and left a mass of innocuous notes. Offending arsenalotti isn't evidence for conspiracy."

"The contracts said nothing about bronze, but the notes were full of it," said the fifth judge. "Bronze means cannon, which they wanted to divert for other purposes."

"What do you say to that?" the presiding judge asked.

"A bronze valve weighs less than a brick," Matteo replied. "The *ingegno* Gaspare wanted to build required three."

Some judges were glaring, others looked unreadable. "What has steam to do with caofa, anyway?" asked one testily. "Prisoner, answer that."

"Caofa and steam power? Why, they could both make Venice great," Matteo said simply. "Only savants know about steam, but all the Turkish empire drinks caofa. Perhaps it will make the Dutch great." With all in wreckage about him, he should marshal his forces to preserve what was worth saving. And what was that? Nothing.

The presiding judge stirred. "There are some questions still unanswered," he said.

"I object," said the judge who had demurred earlier. "We have found no evidence of criminal activity. To proceed as you suggest would be an abuse—"

"If the Avogadori find no evidence of a crime, they need not prosecute. Our commission is broader, and we are unencumbered by the constraints you seem to enjoy."

"I—"

"You don't think he should hear this? Oh, very well." The presiding judge lifted his chin to look past Matteo's shoulder. "Get him out of here."

They never came for him. For four days he expected it hourly, soon guessing that the interrogators routinely held back, that anticipation and terror might pull the prisoner taut as a viola string. Far beyond the reach of either, Matteo experienced not remorse, nor defiance or the delusive bravado that crumbled quickly. His friend had been questioned under torment, as had others. What right had he to hope for less?

Gaspare; his father; the Venetian traders he had grown up yearning to emulate: they seemed to regard him in the darkness, all betrayed. He lost count of his meals (a true merchant never loses count) and slid into an aching *dies non juridicus,* like an open sore that neither festers unto death nor scabs.

At one point he suffered a fever, and blazed like a coal that will consume itself by morning. He imagined the interrogators finding him thus, and later recalled the encounter so vividly (he could see their indignant expressions upon feeling the fever radiate from his skin, as though this were a particularly unworthy trick) that he wondered if it had happened. No rope burns on his wrist, however; no unsocketed joints from having hung from the ground while . . . he could not think farther. While what was done to Gaspare happened, but hadn't, to him.

He was awake when he heard two pairs of boots approaching, though he could not say what he had been thinking a second earlier. The footsteps moved faster than those of turnkey leading prisoner, and stopped

outside his cell. Matteo sat up, gathering what wits remained, as he heard a key scrape noisily in the lock. He had learned to avert his face as the door swung open, and shielded his eyes with a hand before looking back.

"Matteo Benveneto," someone said. Matteo was not used to being addressed by name. "Leave the door ajar and stand back," the voice added in a lower tone. A man in lawyer's robes stepped forward as the door swung to and the brightness dimmed. Matteo stood with an effort.

"My name is Ludovico Contarini," the lawyer said. "I work for the Avogadori di Comun." At one time, he and Matteo would have been about the same age. "Do you remember me?"

"No." Matteo was trying to think, and added, "I did not think my case was before the Avogadori."

"It is not, but it began with us, and we try not to let go of anything. Sit down," he added. Matteo sat, as far from the light as he could. The lawyer sat as well, surprising him even more by straddling the bench so that his back was to the door.

"The Avogadoria summoned you to a hearing, but the Council of Ten intervened, as it often does. The counselors were unhappy, among other things, because the Holy Office had come upon your name in the course of a routine case of divination. They felt, and in this we concur, that the ecclesiastical authorities cannot be allowed to intercede frivolously in the Republic's court system. Memories of the Interdict are too recent.

"Do you understand this?"

Matteo frowned. "No," he said.

"I thought not." Contarini reached into his robes. "Lean forward," he said in a softer tone.

Matteo tilted his head, puzzled, and a soft object was placed in his hands. "Drink," the lawyer said. The skin was small, and Matteo ran his fingers over its slithery shape in bewilderment. Speaking loudly, the lawyer pulled the cork and pushed it toward Matteo's mouth. Matteo raised it and drank. The wine stung the roof of his mouth, and his eyes filled with tears. He almost sputtered, then swallowed and drank again. Almost immediately the skin was empty, and was being removed from his hands.

"Prisoners are often too famished to comprehend what I must tell them. A mouthful goes far in your condition, though any more and you would fall over."

"Thank you," Matteo whispered. Then he added, slightly louder: "The Holy Office was mistaken in its allegations."

"About you? True enough, and you will be delighted to hear that they seem inclined to take no further action. I shouldn't tell you, but since it hardly matters now I will add that the Avogadori's report found no evidence that a mug of your caofa infusion will madden a workman."

Wit flickered, a spark from a cold ember. "Then I can go?" Matteo asked.

Contarini looked at him closely. "No. Agents of the Council of Ten had been following your movements for some time, and they found lots of disruptive activity. Did you really tell an official of the Arsenal that they should make caofa their *bevanda ordinaria?*"

Matteo was feeling the wine spread through his system. His head seemed clearer, though his chest tingled. "They consider that treason?"

"I'm not going to judge their proceedings, which remain almost wholly secret. It is only because we are able to send one *avogadore* to sit upon their courts that we know anything at all. Ser Giustinian, for whom I work, was among the four councilors who heard your case. He wrote a memorandum of your testimony, which we have already burned, lest one of their agents find it." He paused. "Are you listening?"

Matteo held himself still. "You are saying that I have been condemned."

"I am saying that sentence will be passed upon you this evening, when they meet. This afternoon, of course, they are all at Mass." His tone was faintly mocking. "The bridges are jammed right now, but the council will meet at nine. With the return of reports from abroad, they are now ready to settle your case."

"From abroad? I do not understand."

The lawyer sighed. "All your letters to foreign destinations have been opened and read. But since some were intercepted only once aboard, the reports on their contents must travel back by return voyage. Why do you think they have kept you here so long?"

"Our business correspondence?" Matteo shook his head in wonder. "Those letters were to our agents, buyers in Alexandria and the Levant! If I am to be judged by their contents, I shall be freed."

"Ser Benveneto, please do not think that. The Council of Ten does not have to prove your complicity before deciding to get rid of you. They deal with threats to the Republic's internal security, and one need not conspire with our enemies to disturb the social order. The council read your letters to learn whether you had fellow conspirators, not to determine what to do with you. They have doubtless already made that decision."

Matteo pondered, holding up the lawyer's words in the strange clarity of his present thoughts. The situation seemed no different from what had obtained before he arrived. "So why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"Because you have the opportunity to make a statement." Contarini turned and lifted something: a writing tray, with inkpot inlaid and a pen lying across it. "It has been six weeks since your appearance before the council, and Ser Giustinian maintained strongly that you should have the chance to add to your testimony."

"Add what?" Matteo asked. Then he caught an undercurrent of the lawyer's words. "Why was I never interrogated? That is how you supplement prisoners' testimony, is it not?"

Contarini was adjusting the tray on his lap. "The council is far from foolish. They realize their increasing unpopularity, and your case—the merchant who poured caofa—is well known. Ser Giustinian at length persuaded them that unless they were confident of finding something, they should not subject you to torment."

As they did my partner. What did Gaspare say, when he must have known what they wanted? Matteo could not enter that thought, it lay beyond seas he would ever cross.

"A statement could hardly hurt you," the lawyer said. "The last report

reached port yesterday, and the Ten are annoyed that it contains nothing. An expression of cooperation from you might salve their anger."

A statement could hardly help me. It certainly could not help his family or Gaspare. Though perhaps he was to think otherwise: doomed regardless, should he not take the opportunity to castigate his folly, absolve his associates, praise Venice? The temptation was tremendous: Matteo could feel the logic of its urgency, the needed supplement to the inadequate truths of his testimony. Provided freely despite, because, it had not been extracted by force.

"I . . ." You what? *I condemn myself.* As you should. Nothing true would do anything else.

"Yes?"

"I," and could say no more. From that word, nothing could follow.

"Gaspare," he said, "did nothing wrong. Neither did anyone in my family. I urged them to let me import caofa, and they assented."

"Good," the lawyer said. He was writing. "And you?"

"Me?"

"What of your own actions?" The pen had paused.

"I brought this down upon them." Gesturing, simply, about him.

"Yes, but how?"

Matteo grimaced, fretful. "I told them all that. Jews, the Arsenal, our little booth." Shame settled over him like soot. "Everything I said before was true."

"Nothing more?"

What did the man want? "Everything," Matteo repeated. He sat silently as the lawyer finished writing.

"Very well," Contarini said at last. "This will be entered in evidence." He stood and turned toward the door. "They will probably send for you, and you will be taken across the Ponte dei Sospiri to the Palazzo. If this happens, you may have one more chance to say something before sentencing."

"I beg your pardon?" Matteo's attention snagged on this. "We are in the Palazzo."

"Here? No, this is the New Prison." Contarini looked at him oddly. "The cells of the *pozzi* are . . . only for short stays."

Matteo could not explain why this disclosure so disoriented him. Wretched as he was, his deracination was exacerbated to vertigo by this awareness, and when the guards came for him hours later ("Don't bring your bag," with a laugh), he staggered in the corridor and had to be pulled upright. His journey across the Bridge of Sighs, its windows glinting in the torchlight of night-time Venice, produced a pang of such piercing misery that he halted in mid-passage, as though the wavering reflections on the canal and the shouts of protracted *battagliole* were signals of urgent import. A jab sent him stumbling forward, down the last dozen steps of the descending arch and into the Palazzo Ducale, returned at last.

The haggard man sitting on a far bench in the busy waiting room looked at him in astonishment, and it was only as he saw the expression change that Matteo recognized Gaspare. He was dressed like a worker, and bruise-colored bags sagged beneath each eye. The young man rose

and was immediately forced back into his seat by the guards on either side.

"Matteo!" His gaze ran up and down, and Matteo realized what his beard, his filthy clothes, and hair must look like. He took a step forward and was restrained. There were another half dozen people in the room, including Contarini, who was looking at him. Matteo was tugged backward, but resisted for a second.

"You have been imprisoned this whole time?" Gaspare called. Matteo gestured: As you can see. He began to ask something, but was firmly pulled away; the two men were not to speak. He sat fifteen feet away against the opposite wall, exchanging mute looks with his friend until the double door opened and a guard stepped out.

"The prisoner Benveneto." He was hauled to his feet, but walked across the parquet floor unassisted. Into the inner chamber, whose dimness could no longer affect him, who had spent months in darkness.

There were more than five judges sitting this time; perhaps all Ten, although Matteo did not think he could count without using a finger.

"Matteo Benveneto," said one without preamble. "You have engaged in activities disruptive to the civil order of Venice, sought to make secret treaties with foreigners, and derided the wisdom of the city's traders and nobles to all who would listen.

"Had we found any evidence that you intended harm to the Republic—" He paused and looked hard at Matteo— "our response would have been immediate and terrible.

"Instead, we sentence you to ten years' exile from Venice and its possessions." He lifted a sheet of paper he had been holding in his lap, and a clerk hastened to take it.

"Have you anything to say?"

Matteo was too stunned to answer. He had expected merely to be hanged.

"No," he said at last. And then: "All I have said has been true."

The judge quirked his lips. "The same for me," he said. "Take him away."

No one stopped him from walking unsteadily to Gaspare. "What did they do to you?" he asked.

"They confiscated the *ingegno,*" the engineer said urgently. "Seized the workshop and our papers."

Matteo could think of no reply save "I am sorry." He looked into his friend's eyes. "But how are you?" he persisted.

"You must go now," said Contarini, coming up. He held a paper in his hand. "It is not good for your friend to be seen speaking to you."

Matteo looked stricken, but it was Gaspare who spoke. "That does not matter," he said firmly. He looked coldly at Contarini, who shook his head and walked over to the guards.

"Your family will fall liable for our costs," Gaspare said. "I tried to speak to them, but my father forbade any contact."

Matteo's heart contracted. "Do you still have your position?" he asked.

"I now work in the iron foundry," Gaspare replied with a shrug. "The dignities of the *bronzeri* are denied me."

"The Iron Age came after the Bronze," said Contarini briskly, returning with two guards in attendance. "Bid your friend farewell, Benveneto. You have a voyage ahead of you."

The two young men looked at each other. "What a mess," said Gaspare. "Weren't we going to win *ricchezza e fama?*"

"For our familes and for Venice, I believe." Matteo smiled, aching. "And some would spill over on us."

The guards' grip tightened on his arms. He took a step back, but turned to Contarini. "Between the Ages of Bronze and Iron came the Age of Heroes, remember?" The taunt was like a compress over pain.

"Heroics?" said the engineer, startled.

"Yes!" Matteo called as they led him away. "How do you like that idea?"

Gaspare smiled sadly. "*Se è da scherzo, è troppo; se è da vero, è poco,*" he said.

Night had fallen, but Venice partied on, exultantly and combatively. The *battagliole* season would soon give way to Carnival, which was already showing its symptoms, a dinner guest who arrives earlier each year.

The lawyer conducted them down a series of corridors—public ones, the kind with windows along one wall. Matteo caught glimpses every seventh step: enormous shadows dancing on the sides of buildings; the Ponte della Paglia writhing with men, as though *pugni* were stilling battling for it. Shouts on the water, still dark with boats.

"The *popolani* seem to be rioting," Matteo observed. He added bitterly: "Despite my being in prison."

"I'm glad they don't know about the caofa shipment," Contarini muttered.

"Shipment? Which one?"

"Did I not tell you? The autumn galleys have returned, including the one from Alexandria bearing the reader's report on your letters. That ship also contains a large load of caofa beans."

"My caofa!" Matteo stopped dead. "What will my family do?"

"Well, they won't try to sell it, that's for sure." The lawyer favored Matteo with a grim smile. "I doubt your father even needs to be told."

A guard prodded him, and he resumed his pace. They descended a staircase, where an official coming up stared at them. Bearded and dirty, Matteo realized he still looked like a prisoner. And of course, he still was one.

"We are putting you on a ship tonight," Contarini was saying. "Your father has paid for passage, and I believe there is a purse awaiting you. You will not starve."

"Tonight?"

"Did you hope to bid your family farewell? You're still not thinking." They were on the ground floor, where he pointed them toward an exit. "You're headed upriver, if that's what you're worried about. No intolerable sea voyage."

Did they know everything about him? Everything that could be overheard, anyway. How many anonymous pages had been scribbled by infor-

mants, preserved in the city's archives, ready for kindling should the council want a fire? *Fatti,* compressed in imperishable millions, useful only to damn.

They emerged into one of the courtyards, too crowded and garish with lights for Matteo to tell which one. "Mother of Jesus," Contarini swore. "This can't be happening in the Broglio."

Matteo laughed. "Listen to yourself," he said, but was drowned out by the cries of the revelers. Many were actually wearing carnival masks, illegal this early in the season. One carried a papier-mâché *uccello* beneath the front of his tunic, which he would abruptly display to scandalized shrieks.

"Let's get out of here," said Contarini. "*Not* through the Arco." Matteo looked toward the crowded entryway, where revelers were still pouring in. He could understand how the lawyer might not wish to get caught in the narrow Arco Foscari with a stream of boisterous *popolani*.

The crowds on the Molo San Marco were just as bad, but the open space was less alarming. The four men stood beneath the colonnade, looking out upon the teeming wharf and the waters beyond.

"It may be late before we put you on your ship," Contarini observed. He sighed. "I would enjoy a cup of caofa right now."

Matteo didn't think he heard him right. "Do you drink caofa?" he asked wonderingly.

"Not very often." The lawyer looked at him reproachfully. "You sold it near the Rialto, not the Piazetta."

And will next sell it where? The Hapsburg lands, of riverine trade, beer, and noisome snow, lay before him; what could it matter if he introduced caofa to such trolls? Exile, the condition of Jews and imprudent scholars, was a dish he would learn to keep down, employing his skills with tongues and accounts as a cobbler does his last.

One of the guards stirred. "Ser," he said. "There is a customs launch moving on the water."

"What?" But Matteo, understanding faster and looking with a practiced eye, saw it first. Beyond the heads of the crowd, perhaps sixty feet out in the broad Canale di San Marco, a pair of lamps disclosed the low form of a boat. Figures were crawling over bales, unnoticed though not stealthily. A gondola touched the launch, and more men debarked.

"It is the Nicolotti!" Contarini cried. "They are hijacking confiscated cargo!"

People on the edge of the quay had begun to notice, and were cheering. Did the Nicolotti win today, or were they trying to salvage their honor after a Castellani victory? It was the only question to ponder, and Matteo could not bring himself to ponder much. Let the *Shirri* find a boat and go after them.

"They'll throw the shit in the canal," the other guard predicted. It seemed likely enough. Customs agents only took on seized goods, contraband or irregular wares, whose disposition was sufficiently problematic that—

"*My beans!*" Matteo screamed. He was down the steps and running before either guard could grab him. He nearly crashed into a big-bellied ar-

tisan wearing an admiral's hat, and before he could recover his balance a swarm of shouting youths had enveloped them. Matteo pushed frantically, expecting a hand on his collar at any second, and found himself squirming deeper into the crowd.

The revelers were close-packed but directionless, and Matteo was able to press between them. He saw an open space ahead and squeezed into it, to find an apprentice on hands and knees vomiting onto the cobblestones. A Pantaleone mask, already stepped on, lay beside him. Matteo bent and snatched it up.

He kept the smell of the canal ahead of him as he tugged the dirty mask over his face. Did it cover his beard? The eye holes finally slid into place, and Matteo could see the launch coming closer to the wharf. Hooded Nicolotti were gleefully tearing open the bales and hurling their contents toward the shore. The first handfuls fell short and rained into the canal, but within a minute the brawniest of them, posing like a new doge throwing coins into the multitude, managed to reach the edge of the crowd. The celebrants whooped and snatched at the largess, which they examined and then flung at each other. One landed at Matteo's feet, and he picked it up.

It was a caofa bean, of course, but green as a pea. Matteo stared. His agent had managed to procure unroasted beans—still scalded so they couldn't be grown (although it would be worthwhile to try), but likely to remain fresh longer. Caofa that might taste as he remembered it from Alexandria.

Matteo closed his eyes, feeling his heart scalded. More beans pelted the crowd, which was booing lustily.

He did not hear the other craft approach until the increasingly excited pitch of the roar at last penetrated his misery. Faces were turned east, arms pointing. Matteo leaned over the edge of the water, although the occasional nearby splash warned of the pressure exerted by the crowd behind him, and saw the barge approaching.

The arsenalotti who manned it made no attempt to disguise their identities, and their narrow flatboat was recognizably the design used to move lumber through the Arsenal basins. But what Matteo saw was the splendid structure that rose from the deck, like the cabin of the doge's galley. Its underside lit by a blazing fire, massive as a gigantic bell and beautifully trimmed with brass fittings, the *ingegno* called forth cries of admiration.

Pipes protruded at right angles like flagpoles, and one of the arsenalotti reached to seize a valve, then snatched back his hand with a roar. As he danced about swearing and the crowd howled with laughter, a second man wrapped up his hand elaborately and turned the valve. Steam erupted in a white plume, and the crowd burst into cheers.

"Be careful!" Matteo cried inanely. "It's not a toy!"

But a toy was exactly what it was. The arsenalotti capered for the crowd, bowing and waving at their trophy—what impulse had moved them to bring it out? disdain for poor Gaspare? pride in Arsenal workmanship?—while the fire crackled merrily, as though heating soup. Their sweaty faces beamed in the reflected light, looking at the thousands lining the quay.

When they caught sight of the Nicolotti launch, they bellowed with out-

rage. Imprecations were hurled, and returned. The launch was slowly being turned about, while the barge made straight for it.

"*No!*" cried Matteo. The barge struck the smaller vessel amidships, and instantly men were leaping from one ship to the other. The crowd was swelling as word spread and people came running out of the Piazetta.

The explosion produced little light, just a tremendous thunderclap and darkness as the flames vanished into steam and debris. The shockwave struck Matteo an instant later, wet and hot. The expanding ball of steam was immediately diffuse enough to admit light, and dancing flames appeared on both boats. Men were screaming, falling into the water.

The quality of noise from the crowd had altered, but could grow no louder. Most of the *ingegno* was lying near the port side of the barge, which was listing markedly. With a groan it slid into the water and disappeared in a last gout of steam.

Both ships were bobbing empty, although there seemed to be some movement in the water. Splotches of flame dotted the bales like spilled grease, and began spreading to join each other. Within seconds the entire mound was ablaze, a pyre spilling black smoke. Matteo made a sound, but no one heard him.

Then the wind shifted, and they caught it. Roasting caofa, more fragrant than the drink itself, the finest smell in the world. Waves of it came off the boat, expanding to spread across the waterfront and Piazetta. Matteo was weeping, eyes streaming with hot air and cinders, even as the essence rose into his nostrils.

Borne on the lagoon breeze, the cloud spread across Venice. Carousers paused and sniffed with wonder; some recognized it and cheered. Enticing as it disappeared, the aroma expanded to fill every space open to it, an insubstantial dream of fragrant, marvelous caofa. ❍

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Lost Pages

I think it's safe to make one generalization about everyone holding a copy of this magazine at the moment: we all like to read. But what strange combination of forces —nature and nurture—conspire to birth a reader? After all, there are so many more non-readers than bibliophiles, people who, once out of school, never willingly pick up another book in their lifetimes, that the set of circumstances that produce inveterate bookhounds must be rare indeed.

Rare, perhaps, but not so very far outside the boundaries of the easily comprehendible mundane world. All it takes to produce an avid reader out of a bright, impressionable youth is a little alienation; a soupçon of ambition; a smattering of hubris, and, paradoxically, self-doubt; access to books; a lack of competing diversions; and some support from select peers and adult mentors. At least that's the conclusion we can draw from reading Michael Dirda's amiable, fascinating memoir, *An Open Book* (W. W. Norton, hardcover, $24.95, 320 pages, ISBN 0-393-05756-9). As most of you know, Dirda is a Pulitzer-Prize-winning critic for The Washington *Post*, and one of the staunchest supporters of imaginative literature in the mainstream media. He's chosen now generously to share with us the roots of his lifelong fascination with the printed word, and he's produced a charming account, both universal and specific, archetypical yet unique.

Born to lower-middle-class, not particularly bookish parents in 1948 in the smallish city of Lorain, Ohio, Dirda quickly fell in love with the printed word. Before you could say "Big Little Books," Dirda was seeking solace and excitement and mind-expansion in the pages of Robert Heinlein, Lord Dunsany, H.P. Lovecraft, and *Green Lantern* comics, as well in such theoretically beyond-his-age classics as *War and Peace* and *Walden*. From elementary school through high school and into Oberlin College, Dirda charts his bittersweet initiation into the immemorial world of literature, bringing his story to an end with his graduation from Oberlin. He excels at capturing the differing mindsets and dreams peculiar to each stage of a book-loving boy's life, from first-grader to adolescent to young adult.

But although the strong, colorful warp of Dirda's memoir consists of loving reflections on all the books he's assimilated, the equally vivid woof of his text is rich with homely observations and anecdotes relating to the wider world of the 1950s and 1960s that he inhabited. The affectionate, subtle portraits of his family members, friends and teachers; the depiction of his hometown, with its steel mills and ethnic neighborhoods; the expansion of his horizons on trips to Mexico and France and during his college years—all these sections of his narrative are

sharp and compelling, brilliantly interwoven with the books that informed them. For anyone who lived through these eras, Dirda conjures up instant, keen-edged, unreasoning nostalgia. Yet he also can view these periods in clear-eyed hindsight as historical artifacts whose vanished modes are explicable in retrospect by analysis and logic.

Dirda's tone in this memoir is self-effacing, wry, humorous, poignant, appreciative, tinged with small regrets that are outweighed by gratitude and pleasure for the life he's lived. These emotions are conveyed in a prose that is limpid, assured, colorful and startling. Like some Nabokov of the Midwest, Dirda frames his tales with utmost art, producing a languorous, satisfying narrative that dips and weaves gracefully from days of routine pleasures to moments of crisis and existential growth. Sensual and full of acute sensory details, Dirda's tale recreates his vanished past in full panoply.

When in his early years at Oberlin Dirda experienced a moment of despair, his father advised him thusly: "'You know how to work, right? Just work harder than anybody else. If you do that, everything will turn out fine.'"

It's advice that Dirda took to heart, and which has resulted in his large accomplishments to date. But adding the elements of love and dedication was not something his father recommended—that instinct comes from Dirda himself.

Graphic Marvels

I'm not sure which I like better: Jim Woodring's thick-lined, zenrich, black-and-white artwork, or his lush, Parrish-psychedelic colored panels. But whichever style takes top honors in your estimation, you'll find plenty of both in *The Frank Book* (Fantagraphics, hardcover, $39.95, 351 pages, ISBN 1-56097-534-2), which collects all of the scattered strips concerning Woodring's strange hero in a stranger land, where buildings resemble mutant turnips and Frank's pet/companion Pupshaw looks like a cathedral-style Philco radio with legs. Frank himself is a "generic anthropomorph," an anomalous creature with a rich cartoon lineage, yet utterly unique. "Innocent yet not noble," Frank undergoes more transmutations and allegorical headtrips than a dozen David Lindsay characters. His adventures occur in a world at once comfortably outré and shockingly familiar. Or is that shockingly outré and comfortably familiar? Such flip-flops of emotion and perception, along with much laughter, are guaranteed to the lucky reader who purchases this volume. Just the final adventure alone, "Frank's High Horse," in which Frank's hubris delivers him to an extradimensional hell, would justify the price of this handsome coffee-table-sized book, which is not so much a mere "comic" as it is a twenty-first century Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. And if you don't think Pupshaw is cuter than a dozen Tribbles and fiercer than van Vogt's Coeurl, I'll gladly take your copy of this book off your hands. Contact Fantagraphics at 7563 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115.

Warren Ellis should be well-known to SF fans for his *Transmetropolitan* series just recently ended, the saga of gonzo future journalist

Spider Jerusalem. Now, with *Orbiter* (Vertigo/DC Comics, hardcover, $24.95, 100 pages, ISBN 1-4012-0056-7) Ellis and his co-creator, artist Colleen Doran, venture into John Varley/Stephen Baxter territory to deliver a rousing tale of humanity's retreat from space exploration and an unexpected invitation to return to the stars.

Some ten years or so into the future, an abandoned Kennedy Space Center is home to an encampment of squatters—an encampment about to be leveled by the return of the last space shuttle ever to have flown. The *Venture* disappeared inexplicably from orbit a decade past, effectively killing the space program. But now the ship is back—with an organic skin, a new drive mechanism, and one insane crewmember. A hastily assembled team of experts must make sense of this enigma. Little do they know their discoveries will bring them to the edge of the cosmos.

Ellis's scripting is taut and literate. As always in his books, his dialogue is sharp and wry. Tough-talking Colonel Bukovic, the military man in charge, makes Nick Fury look like a Boy Scout. Dr. Terry Marx, the propulsions whiz, comes off like a Rudy Rucker hero. And the deranged pilot of the *Venture*, John Cost, truly seems touched by a nonhuman glory. As for Doran's artwork, she can portray the large vistas of the squalid, all-too-human encampment with the same facility she exhibits when limning the technological wonders of the transfigured shuttle. Her full-page canvases are dramatic, beautiful, and well-composed. And Dave Stewart's darkish palette of colors manages to exhibit a pleasing variety, despite being shorn of lighter tonalities.

Dedicated to the astronauts who lost their lives in the *Columbia* disaster, this book dares to assert that any setbacks in mankind's journey outward will be only temporary, and that the human spirit will triumph in the end.

Artist and writer Howard Chaykin will be long remembered in the SF field for his satirical, near-future *American Flagg!* series of some years ago. Now, with his co-writer David Tischman and artist Niko Henrichon, he's turned his hand to a steampunkish adventure, one that summons up the glory days of television's *The Wild, Wild West*. The book is titled *Barnum! In Secret Service to the USA* (DC/Vertigo, hardcover, $29.95, 128 pages, ISBN 1-4012-0072-9), and it stars none other than that bumptious showman P.T. Barnum himself. Having saved the President from an assassination attempt, Barnum and friends—a heterogeneous assortment of freakish sideshow performers—are drafted to stop the machinations of the evil genius Nikola Tesla, who plans to establish his own North American kingdom after isolating a portion of the USA. From the streets of Victorian New York and across the nation by train to San Francisco, Barnum and Tesla wage battle. The former relies on his crew of nine nonpareils—a kind of steampunk Justice League—while the latter utilizes diabolical inventions and the wiles of his assistant, Ada, Countess Lovelace.

The script by Chaykin and Tischman is concise, elliptical and fast-paced. Their characterization of Barnum is subtle and flattering to the man. Their portrait of Tesla—in real life of course not a villain at

all—is cut more broadly. Henrichon's beautiful, funny, and period-realistic art manages the impossible task of conflating Mort Drucker broadness with Winsor McKay delicacy. (And I think I spotted the savage boy Impy, from *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, in one panel.) All in all, this is a rollicking adventure that leaves James West and Artemus Gordon in the dust.

Zinedom

We might just be in a Silver Age for semipro zines. Dozens are flourishing—although there is always mortality, as witnessed by the recent death of Ben Jeapes's *3SF*. Here are a few recently to hand.

A critical publication, not one devoted to fiction, *Fantasy Commentator* has just reached a remarkable milestone: sixty years of activity. Double Issue 55 & 56 (perfect-bound, $10.00, 134 pages, ISSN unavailable) contains two meaty articles that constitute the bulk of the text. Eric Leif Davin and Norman Metcalf offer a revisionist take on women in SF in their "Hidden from History," while the late Sam Moskowitz reports on his dealings with Hugo Gernsback as editor on Gernsback's last SF zine, *Science Fiction* +, in "The Return of Hugo Gernsback, Part IV." Fleshing out the issue are poems, reviews, a tribute to Lloyd Biggle, Jr., and a survey of the fiction of little-known UK writer Francis Rayer by Andrew Darlington. All of this is lovingly assembled by editor A. Langley Searles, whom you may contact at 48 Highland Circle, Bronxville, NY 10708.

Australia's *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* (Andromeda Spaceways Publishing, saddle-stapled, AUS$6.95, 128 pages, ISSN 1446-781X) has flourished for two years already, but I've just now seen copies, in the shape of issues number six and number seven. This joyful magazine, well laid-out with fetching B&W illos throughout, exhibits a lot of charm. The pretense that it is indeed the onboard publication of a spaceflight service is maintained just far enough to charm, without overdoing the game. But more importantly, each issue features around a dozen stories ranging from sweet but minor to fully crafted and impactful. Well-known names such as Mat Coward, Juliet Marillier, and Bruce Boston consort with journeymen such as Geoffrey Maloney and numerous first-timers. (*ASIM* deserves much credit for encouraging a new generation of writers.) Their fiction ranges the map of the fantastical, from outright fantasy to hard SF, much in the manner of *F&SF*. Two interviews per issue, plus reviews and other features, add to the allure. Visit *www.andromedaspaceways.com* to learn how to subscribe.

Although *Talebones* (Fairwood Press, perfect-bound, $6.00, 88 pages, ISSN 1084-7197) has had to downgrade to a semi-annual schedule, there's been no diminution in the quality of their fiction, as evidenced by issue number 26. James Van Pelt writes entertainingly of an undying gambler in "The Pair-a-Duce Comet Casino All-Sol Poker Championships," while Mark Rich limns a portrait of a grief-haunted man (a portrait inspired by the life of C.M. Kornbluth) in "Too Celestial Lane." Five other stories plus an assortment of poetry and reviews round out the issue. And the illustrations, as always, are among

the best in the field. Drop on over to *www.fairwoodpress.com* to learn more about this handsome and well-stuffed zine.

Surely the most strikingly gruesome story in issue number 12 of *Flesh & Blood* (Flesh & Blood Press, saddle-stapled, $6.00, 52 pages, ISSN 1524-1149) is "Bugs," by C.C. Parker, in which a woman gives birth to a living "piece of meat"—an entity with strange powers of attraction for various unwelcome intruders. But other tales in this zine, although exhibiting more subtlety, are equally creepy. "The Girl in the Cathedral," by Jennifer Cox, is one example, with its depiction of a young female student who has the misfortune to meet a "death shade." Definitely not for the faint-of-heart or -stomach, *Flesh & Blood* shows on every page why it was a Stoker Award nominee for 2002. Check out their website at *www.fleshandbloodpress.com*.

Saving the best for last, we turn to *The Third Alternative* (TTA Press, saddle-stapled, $7.00, 66 pages, ISSN 1352-3783). This oversized, elaborately designed zine—issue number 35 is under discussion—is a graphically beautiful showcase for some hard-edged, polished fiction, the best instance of which is Ian Watson's "The Butterflies of Memory," in which sentient winged cell-phones (surreal, but believable) begin to exhibit a sinister side. Christopher Fowler's wry and provocative musings on the Cannes Film Festival and a dozen or so reviews/interviews offer a nice contrast to the rest of the fiction. Under editor Andy Cox, *The Third Alternative* just keeps getting better and better. Find out for yourself at *www.ttapress.com*.

Inconstant Constance

At age eighty-three, with a big new career-capping retrospective volume just out—*Bradbury Stories: 100 of Bradbury's Most Celebrated Tales*—Ray Bradbury might be forgiven for resting on his laurels. He's worked hard and long and to great effect, giving pleasure to millions. But such is not his way. For a man to whom writing is not work but sheer enjoyable confirmation of his sacred, secular existence, producing yet another book this very same year is not a chore but rather a joyous affirmation of life. And so we encounter *Let's All Kill Constance* (William Morrow, hardcover, $23.95, 210 pages, ISBN 0-06-051584-8). The novel is being marketed as a mystery, which it is. But of course, being a Bradbury book, it's nonetheless utterly fantasticated in the unique Bradbury manner, and will appeal to anyone who has enjoyed Bradbury's many tales in the genre.

An unnamed writer sits at home one "dark and stormy night" in the year 1960. (We will later find this man identified with Bradbury himself, as a fellow who "writes people on Mars" and who speculates about composing a novel where the hero smells like kerosene and burns books for a living.) There's a wild inrush of storm, accompanied by a woman: the faded yet still potent film star Constance Rattigan. She clutches two mysterious books sent to her, books that seem to indicate a plot to slay all her old friends, a plot culminating in Constance's own death. She enlists the writerly hero's aid, staying with him that night and disappearing in the morning. Our protagonist in turn appeals to a detective friend named Crumley (certainly an homage to

the mystery writer James Crumley). Together the men begin ransacking Constance's past for clues.

They track down her first husband, a recluse in a junk-filled house. They find a fortune-teller named Queen Califia who was Constance's spiritual advisor. They meet Constance's brother, a priest. An old man in a disused projection booth at Grauman's Chinese Theater appears to be her father. Two ancient actors knew Constance at the start of her career. Into the case as helpers come Henry, a blind black man, and Fritz Wong, a film director. Clues begin to cohere. It appears that Constance is not the intended victim, but rather the perpetrator of the series of seeming murders. And the explanations for her mad assault on her past have tangled psychosexual roots.

Bradbury spins the plot along in a madcap way, with lots of action, producing a fizzy, frothy, sprightly confection of a book reminiscent of a Thorne Smith novel. Chapters and sentences are short but poetically striking. The core tropes of Bradbury's career—the glamour of films, the eeriness of death and the afterlife, the creative compulsions of the artist—all pinwheel around the action like fireworks. Our hero is the eternal child-man, who will never die—or at least who feels that way in his heart. Yet he is not immune to mortality, recognizing that all good things come to an end. But rather than instill bitterness in him, such a recognition merely makes him savor life the more. His willingness to help Constance despite the warnings of his friends marks him as a kind of savior figure who leaves no soul behind.

Zesty, inventive, full of the trademark lifeshouts for which Bradbury is beloved, this novel rings interesting changes on the notion of the self-made person, showing that preceding every bright resurrection necessarily comes a messy death.

Cryptastrophe in the Year Zero

Howard Hendrix's previous four novels—*Lightpaths* (1997); *Standing Wave* (1998); *Better Angels* (1999); and *Empty Cities of the Full Moon* (2001)—all exhibited an admirable and remarkable playfulness, an engagement with abstruse philosophical and metaphysical conundrums, embodied in likable characters and recomplicated plots. Each book has been a little more assured and smooth than the previous, and the publication of his fifth novel continues that trend.

Had Neal Stephenson not already used the neologism *Cryptonomicon* for his own 1999 novel, that title would have fitted perfectly *The Labyrinth Key* (Del Rey, trade paperback, $13.95, 320 pages, ISBN 0-345-45596-7), a book that seeks to erase the distinction between "theology and technology," a centuries-old split that in Hendrix's view has tainted our civilization in a nearly fatal manner. (This theme recalls the mystical engine of John Crowley's ongoing *Aegypt* quartet, begun in 1987.) Using cryptography as his main leitmotif and tossing in resonant material from mythology, quantum physics, and a dozen other disciplines, Hendrix fashions a book that ignites all the intellectual depth charges of a Robert Anton Wilson novel while simultaneously functioning on its surface level as a satisfyingly convoluted spy thriller.

Jaron Kowk is a man with a

seemingly straightforward mission: to help America's National Security Agency beat the Chinese in the "quantum crypto race." But Jaron has gotten sidetracked in the labyrinth of history, running the threads of his researches deeper and deeper into the numinous alchemical past. Eventually, the fruits of his off-kilter hypotheses trigger his mysterious disappearance. But before he vanishes he broadcasts into the web a virtuality episode containing numerous clues to his findings.

Ben Cho is the man assigned by the NSA to pick up the trail of Jaron's work. Interacting with Jaron's widow, Cherise; with a Hong Kong detective named Marilyn Lu; with the Deputy Director of the NSA, James Brescoll; and with a handful of other oddball characters, some gonzo, some deadly, Ben will discover that his bond with Jaron goes deeper than expected. Amidst terrorist attacks, ploys, and counterploys, Ben undergoes a transformation that allows him to become both the labyrinth of the universe and the key to its unlocking.

Hendrix has a lot of fun setting up a raft of competing conspiracies: besides the NSA, the CIA and the Chinese secret service, there's the Tetragrammaton, the Kitchener Foundation, an outlaw segment of the web named Cybernesia, and, most mysterious of all, the Instrumentality. Hardcore SF readers will of course recognize this imaginary polity from the stories of "Cordwainer Smith," and Hendrix is deliberately invoking Smith's creation, with its not-so-hidden guiding hand that grips mankind's future. With tongue firmly planted in cheek, Hendrix tells us that one "Felix C. Forrest," a spook in the 1940s, was a pivotal figure in the net of conspiracies. Of course, "Felix C. Forrest" was another of Paul Linebarger's pen-names. With his levels upon levels of watchers, and numerous triple- and double-agents, Hendrix approaches the giddy heights of an Edward Whittemore novel. Add to this such Egan/Stross riffs as "virtualization bombs" and "cryptastrophes," and you have a potent mix indeed.

Hendrix succeeds almost uniformly in blending spy-caper action with mind-boggling discourse quite believably and non-lumpishly. The one glaring flub along these lines I'd cite is the theoretical lecture on topology which Ben Cho delivers while getting a lap dance in a strip club (yes, that's what I said). But this scene occupies only a minuscule slice of what is otherwise a bang-up hybrid of Kabbalah and terrorists, transcension and realpolitik.

Leaving Without a Jet Plane

Readers of *Asimov's* might recall a story by Ursula K. Le Guin that appeared in these pages in 1999. "The Royals of Hegn" concerned itself with a land or plane of reality divorced from ours by subtle distances, where every inhabitant save a handful was a snooty blueblood, and where the few Commoners provided a kind of spectacle we associate with Lady Di. This tale was a pleasant-enough jest, an upending of received wisdom. But now, presented in conjunction with its sister stories, it becomes much more, a single colorfully lacquered brick in a more impressive edifice.

Changing Planes (Harcourt, hardcover, $22.00, 246 pages, ISBN 0-15-100971-6) collects sixteen stories, only six of which have seen

the light of day previously. The stories are embedded in a narrative frame that offers Le Guin nearly infinite possibilities.

A contemporary woman named Sita Dulip, as the nameless first-person narrator tells us, has discovered an interesting fact. By a certain twist of mind, one may unmoor one's sentience in the peculiar stressful conditions found only in airport waiting rooms. Thus a stalled traveler may cross not only astrally but seemingly corporeally to other universes as a tourist and return in the blink of an eye, whiling away the otherwise-lost lounge time in exotic settings. These voyages are supervised and aided by an Interplanary Agency.

The stories that follow this prelude are records of such expeditions either undertaken by the narrator or learned-of secondhand. (Of the narrator we learn little, only that she is "an introvert" and a "coward," preferring the "peaceful . . . dull, ordinary, complicated" universes to the more risk-filled ones. Fetching illustrations by Eric Beddows occasionally portray the narrator as resembling Le Guin herself.) From one strange venue to another we flow, learning of the mysterious, arcane habits and customs and beliefs of the various natives. In one world, seasonal migrations lead to a radically divergent, bivalent lifestyle ("Seasons of the Ansarac"). In another, the very language is enticingly incomprehensible, reflecting perceptual kinks in the aboriginal inhabitants ("The Nna Mmoy Language"). In a third, a feathered race curses those few among it who are born with wings ("The Fliers of Gy").

Some of the stories are sharply plotted; others are diffusely impressionistic; while still others resemble anthropological essays. But in all of them Le Guin's impressive fecundity of invention and resonance of emotion insure that the reader's attention never flags. Some of the stories are pointed satires: "Great Joy" catalogs how one plane becomes Disneyfied. Others are enigmatic fables: the purpose of the labyrinthine structure in "The Building" remains forever obscure. And others are allegories of contemporary events: the ethnic cleansing in "Woeful Tales from Mahigul" clearly reflects the Yugoslavian genocide. But in all cases, Le Guin manages to evoke a wonderful otherworldliness, a sense of being allowed to see vistas never before comprehended.

Borges and Swift are mentioned by name in this volume, and of course the mixed strains of fabulism and satire accurately encompass what Le Guin is mostly aiming for. Readers might also be reminded of Jeff VanderMeer's *Ambergris* stories insofar as both VanderMeer and Le Guin are attempting to fashion palpably outré worlds in rich detail from the ground up. Occasionally there are Jack Vance moments as well. Consider how this passage from "The Ire of the Veski" might have been plucked from just about any Vance novel:

> The Veski are an angry species. Their social life consists largely of arguments, recriminations, quarrels, fights, outbursts of fury, fits of the sulks, brawls, feuds, and impulsive acts of vengeance.
>
> There is no difference in size or strength between the men and women of the Veski. Both sexes supplement their natural strength with weapons, carried

at all times. Their mating is often so violent that it causes injury and occasionally death to one or both of the participants.

But the two literary predecessors that kept occurring to me as I bathed in the lulling current of Le Guin's book were both from men who were famous for endorsing the sheer power of dreams *qua* dreams. I'm thinking of Lord Dunsany and H.P. Lovecraft. In Dunsany's "Idle Days on the Yann," and even more powerfully in Lovecraft's *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1955), one gets this same sense of mystical geographies unrolling themselves at your feet, endless disparate regions "beyond the fields we know," which could yet be reached by those lucky enough to learn how to untether themselves from the quotidian.

Test to Destruction

A Plague of Demons and Other Stories (Baen Books, trade paper, $15.00, 438 pages, ISBN 0-7434-3588-5) is the fourth in a series of recent Baen reprintings of the work of Keith Laumer. This volume centers around the theme of alien contact and offers a complete novel plus seven other works ranging in length from novella to short-short. Its existence should serve to convert a new generation of readers into Laumerophiles, and to remind us older acolytes of his virtues.

I first became enraptured by Laumer's work some thirty-five years ago, at the proverbially receptive age of thirteen. It possessed then—and seems to me to possess now—much to recommend it. Laumer's prose was not flashy—although he could turn out a good sharp simile—but you always recognized its distinctive stamp, a certain distinct voice. His tone was mature, that of an adult who had participated in consequential activities—Laumer had military and diplomatic service under his belt—and who had witnessed some of the world's cosmopolitan glamor. His dialogue was crisp, and his humor sharp. As for his characters—well, Laumer really only had one: the competent, duty-bound, resourceful man, a lone wolf and even a bit of a rogue if need be. What more iconically attractive figure could there be for the typically nerdy SF reader of thirteen such as I once was? If Heinlein had buffed this figure to a high polish, then Laumer did something like mass-produce him. Laumer's competent men were Fords to Heinlein's Cadillacs. They were tougher, more low-rent, less elegant, pitted with hard use. But under their dull hoods lurked 450 horsepower engines.

The lead novel is a prime example of Laumer's propulsive charms. John Bravais is a kind of super-spy called on by an associate in Algeria to help investigate why soldiers are going missing from the battlefield. What Bravais quickly discovers is a conspiracy by aliens and their human confederates to harvest brains as onboard guidance units for weapons in an interstellar war. After much exciting hounds-and-fox action on Earth, Bravais is himself eventually harvested, waking as a cybernetic tank on a lunar battlefield. Is he daunted? Not a whit! He wins the war for humanity and, when offered a new android body, refuses, choosing to remain a tank to carry the war to the stars.

Now *that's* a real man!

All cynical kidding aside, Laumer's stern, even primitive ethos is a compelling and occasionally touching one. Like Howard's Conan, Laumer's heroes live by a clearcut black-and-white code so appealing in this age of muted grays. If you can read without some sniffles "Thunderhead," in which an out-of-shape discarded soldier makes the final sacrifice for his ideals, then I wouldn't really trust you with, say, something as crucial as pet-sitting my dog. "End as a Hero" features van Vogtian effects and plotting without the same melodrama. "Doorstep" is an O. Henry-style one-note sad joke, while "The Star-Sent Knaves" is more typical of the humorous romps Laumer essayed in his Retief stories and elsewhere. Laumer's first sale, "Greylorn," about a dedicated starship captain surmounting mutiny and aliens while Earth's fate hangs in the balance, perfectly represents in embryo all Laumer's later work. And "Of Death What Dreams" deals with the classic dystopian high-society/low-society divide beloved by a generation of SF writers.

But it's in a story like "Test to Destruction" that Laumer spins some interesting changes on his core hero. Subjected simultaneously to torture by humans and psychic probing by aliens, the rebel leader Mallory endures grievous pain to emerge a superman—but a flawed superman, a budding tyrant. That Laumer saw this potential flaw in his fabled credo of rugged individualism is testament to the fairness and balance of his vision.

Laumer juggled the standard tropes of the field gracefully without really inventing any breakthrough concepts of his own. Perhaps his one real innovative idea was that of the Bolos, the aforementioned intelligent tanks. But having access to this consensus stock of tried-and-true ideas allowed him to focus on breakneck plotting and suspense. And actually, he employed the stock images with real brio and knowledge and even foresight. Tell me if the opening to *Plague*—first serialized in 1964—doesn't sound like pure cyberpunk:

> It was ten minutes past high noon when I paid off my helicab, ducked under the air blast from the caged high-speed rotors as they whined back to speed, and looked around the sun-scalded, dust-white, mob-noisy bazaar of the trucial camp-city of Tamboula, Republic of Free Algeria. Merchants' stalls were a clash of garish fabrics, the pastels of heaped fruit, the glitter of oriental gold thread and beadwork, the glint of polished Japanese lenses and finely machined Swedish chromalloy, the subtle gleam of hand-rubbed wood, the brittle complexity of Hong Kong plastic—islands in the tide of humanity. . . . I made my way through the press, shouted at by hucksters, solicited by whining beggars and tattooed drabs, jostled by the UN Security Police escorting officials of a dozen nations.

Toss in the neck-jack that the hero of "Of Death What Dreams" (1970) needs to download a new skill-set, and you've got another godfather of the cyberpunks.

Keith Laumer may have written the same rags-to-riches-through-indomitable-willpower story over and over—but what a story that is! ○

SF Conventional Calendar

The British Commonwealth national conventions are coming up. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

MARCH 2004

12–14—**Life, the Universe & Everything.** For info write **3160 JKHB, Provo UT 84602.** Or phone **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) humanities.byu.edu/ltue. (E-mail) ltue-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.** Con will be held in: Provo UT (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Wilkinson Student Center, BYU. Guests will include: Ruth Thompson, S. Longoria.

19–21—**LunaCon. info@lunacon.org.** Hilton, Rye NY. Constantine, Whelan, Schmeidler, Abrams. NY's traditional con.

19–21—**MillenniCon. (513) 659-2558. www.millennicon.org.** Best Western, Springdale (Dayton) OH. Harry Turtledove.

19–21—**GalactiCon. www.galacticoninc.com. galacticon@vei.net.** Chattanooga TN.

19–21—**StellarCon. (336) 294-8041. stellarcon@triad.rr.com.** Radisson, High Point NC. Saberhagen, Stackpole, Zahn.

19–21—**TechniCon. www.technicon.org. info@technicon.org.** Best Western Red Lion. Blacksburg VA.

24–28—**IAFA, Box 10416, Blacksburg VA 24062. www.iafa.org.** Ft. Lauderdale FL. Academic conference.

26–28—**AggieCon, MSC Box J1, TX A&M U., TAMUS 1237, College Stn. TX 77844. aggiecon.tamu.edu.** On campus.

26–28—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (631) 632-6045. www.iconsf.org.** State U. of NY. 45 min. from hotel.

26–28—**Mid/DeepSouthCon, Box 11446, Memphis TN 38111. www.midsouthcon.org.** Holiday Inn Select. David Brin.

26–28—**FILKONtario. 145 Rice Ave. #98, Hamilton ON L9C 6R3. www.filkontario.ca.** Mississauga ON. SF folksinging.

APRIL 2004

2–4—**Ad Astra, Box 7276, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. (888) 792-9367.** Crowne Plaza Don Valley. Cherryh, Wilson.

2–4—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. (228) 435-5217. www.coastcon.org.** Mississippi Coast Convention Center.

2–4—**OdysseyCon, c/o 901 Jenifer, Madison WI 53703. (608) 260-9924. www.oddcon.org.** Radisson. Joe Haldeman.

2–4—**CostumeCon, c/o Box 656, Decatur GA 30031. www.cc22.org.** Holiday Inn Select. Costumers' big annual meet.

8–11—**World Horror Con, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890. www.whc2004.org.** Embassy No., Phoenix AZ.

8–11—**NorwesCon, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. (206) 270-7850.** SeaTac Doubletree. Resnick, Bova, Haldeman, Baen.

8–11—**GaylaxiCon, 1010 Univ. Ave. #946, San Diego CA 92103. www.gaylaxicon.org.** For gay fans & their friends.

8–12—**SwanCon, Box G429, Perth WA 6841, Australia. www.chronopolis.sf.org.au.** Hilton. Hawkes, Dickinson, Long.

9–11—**MiniCon, Box 8297, Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 824-5559. www.mnstf.org.** Millennium Hotel.

9–12—**UK National Con, 63 Providence Way, Cambridge CB5 9QH, UK. (07092) 221-701. concourse@eastercon.com.**

9–12—**NZ Nat'l. Con, Box 74-013, Market Rd., Auckland, NZ. contour.sf.org.nz.** Rotorua NZ. Turtledove, Benford.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4. Box 1010. Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. Willis, Tenn. WorldCon. $160+.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction. Box 58009. Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $135+ 285+.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** The NASFiC while WorldCons in Glasgow. $75.

AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $125+.

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NEXT ISSUE

JUNE ISSUE

Private eyes have traditionally had to venture all alone down Mean Streets, and next issue Hugo Award-winner **James Patrick Kelly** returns to walk us down some very *strange* Mean Streets in a bizarre future dominated by some enigmatic, unpredictable, and totally ruthless aliens, a world where human existence as we now know it has been turned completely on its head by alien whim, and where a PI reluctantly investigating a politically touchy case bites off far more than she can chew, including the knowledge that "Men Are Trouble." This Future Noir novelette is vivid, inventive, constantly surprising, and highly entertaining, and is likely to be talked about as one of the year's best stories—so don't miss it!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Nebula and Hugo-winner **Nancy Kress** takes us to the far-future for an evocative glimpse of "My Mother, Dancing"; **Lois Tilton** takes us back to a slightly sideways-in-time version of Ancient Rome to listen in on a momentous interview in "The Gladiator's War: A Dialog"; new British writer **Neal Asher** makes a hard-hitting *Asimov's* debut with the tale of the deadly problems faced by "The Veteran" in a hostile high-tech world; **Robert R. Chase** returns with a suspenseful look at what happens when you're forced to take a "Turing Test," with your own existence on the line; new writer **Paul Melko** makes a fascinating *Asimov's* debut with the story of a very strange visitor to a very quiet neighborhood, and the implications of his visit for the entire planet, in "Fallow Earth"; **Ruth Berman** dares to dig up "The Buried Sword," with some very spooky consequences; and new writer **Lena DeTar** makes an evocative *Asimov's* debut, taking us to a newly colonized future Mars, where a young woman must face the dangers of "Steep Silence" if she is to unravel a deadly mystery a generation old.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column continues with notes "Toward a Theory of Story II: There Is One Story and One Story Only"; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our June issue on sale at your newsstand on April 13, 2004.

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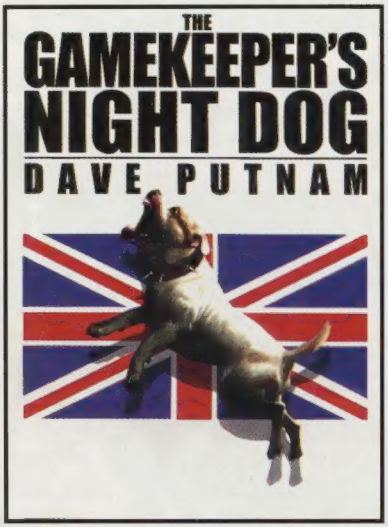
What if The Sun Had Never Set on Britain's Empire?



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